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# Compounding the Sacred and the Profane: How Economic Theory Brings New Insight to the Growth and Decline of American Protestantism

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Claremont McKenna College

**Compounding the Sacred and the Profane:  
How Economic Theory Brings New Insight to the Growth and  
Decline of American Protestantism**

submitted to  
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and  
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by  
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for  
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## INTRODUCTION

Emile Durkheim, one of the most renowned scholars in the field of sociology, proposed the idea that society has an essential role in shaping every aspect of human thought and behavior. This idea extends to all elements of human life. Durkheim, however, took a special interest in how religion operates within society and how it too shaped people's thoughts and behaviors. For Durkheim, the defining essential of religion was not belief in spiritual or supernatural beings, but the definite distinction between the sacred and the profane.<sup>1</sup> The sacred includes things of greater concern that affect the life of the entire community. The profane, on the other hand, includes things that are personal or private in nature and are confined to the minor needs of the individual. In Durkheim's understanding, religion is a system of beliefs and practices related to the sacred and vital issues of the community, and should be distinguished from profane things or the minor interests of individuals. In his work, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim states that,

Since the idea of the sacred is always and everywhere separated from the idea of the profane in the thought of men, and since we picture a sort of logical chasm between the two, the mind irresistibly refuses to allow the two corresponding things to be cofounded, or even to be merely put in contact with each other; for such a promiscuity, or even too direct contiguity, would contradict too violently the dissociation of these ideas in the mind.<sup>2</sup>

This thesis will challenge Durkheim's notion of a distinct and logical separation of the sacred and profane by directly connecting them to each other, and finding contiguity between them. Economic theory and models, which are associated with the profane, will

be used to analyze trends of religious growth and decline within the United States. These theories and models, such as Rational Choice Theory, will be applied in order to better understand and gain new insight into shifts and changes within the religious landscape of the United States. Recent trends of growth and decline within Protestantism, the most prominent Christian tradition in America, will be the focus of the investigation. As its main focus, this thesis will ultimately demonstrate that the trends of decline in the mainline Protestant tradition opposed to the trends of growth in the evangelical Protestant tradition can be best understood by focusing on the unique relationship between a religious organization's degree of tension with society and that organization's congregational attendance. Through the application of economic theory to the sacred, this thesis will ultimately provide greater explanation as to why the religious landscape of the United States is changing and why each religious tradition has differing rates of adherence, even among those traditions that have similar fundamental beliefs. Ultimately, it should be recognized that applying theories that are generally considered to be profane or secular to the realm of the sacred can bring greater clarity to a field that is complex and largely unquantifiable.

### Thesis Layout

Chapter 1, "Economic Theory and How it Applies to Religion", breaks down economic theory into fundamental principles and systematically applies those principles to religion. Other published works in the "economics of religion" field often skip this step, making the work somewhat difficult to understand for readers who do not have a background understanding in economics. Chapter 1 will also describe the status of

America's religious economy throughout history and how government intervention can affect that religious economy. Lastly, objections to the methodology to applying economic theory to religion will be considered.

Chapter 2, "Theories of Religious Change and Recent Shifts in America's Religious Landscape", delves deeper into the field of applying economic theory to religion by outlining supply-side and demand-side explanations of religious change and describing the established Sect-Church Process Theory. This chapter will also introduce a new theory called the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory that attempts to fill some of the gaps and unanswered questions of the established theories in the field. Finally in Chapter 2, the relevant findings of the Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study will be described. These findings will be later used to verify the notions behind the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory.

Chapter 3, "The Mainline Protestant Tradition", introduces and describes mainline Protestantism. The trends of growth and decline within the mainline tradition, found by the Religious Landscape Study, will also be outlined. Finally, this chapter situates mainline Protestantism within the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory, and the theoretical implications of that situation will be discussed.

Chapter 4, "The Evangelical Protestant Tradition", takes a very similar form to Chapter 3 but introduces and describes evangelical Protestantism. This chapter also includes a description of the nondenominational movement within the evangelical tradition. The trends of growth and decline within the evangelical tradition, found by the Religious Landscape Study, are outlined. Lastly, this chapter situates evangelical

Protestantism within the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory, and the theoretical implications of that situation will be discussed.

Chapter 5, “Religious Change in the Local Claremont Area”, is the final chapter of this thesis and applies the large-scale theory and statistics discussed throughout the project to the local setting of Claremont, California. In the research for this chapter, interviews were conducted with Pastors from the Claremont and surrounding areas. General information about the congregations that participated will be provided in this chapter. Finally, there will be analysis of these interviews and they will be considered within the context of the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory.

### Literature Review

The application of economic theory to religion was brought back into academic discussion relatively recently by a small group of scholars. The theoretical backbone of these scholars’ work is the Rational Choice Theory. In economics, Rational Choice Theory serves as a fundamental framework for understanding human behavior. The theory is based on the premise of individual self-interested utility maximization.<sup>3</sup> The Rational Choice Theory surmises that, when faced with a choice, people will evaluate the different options and ultimately chose the option that maximizes their net incurred benefits. Gary Becker, a prominent American social economist, pioneered the idea that Rational Choice Theory could also be applied to a great variety of human behaviors outside the realm of economics. In his work, Becker demonstrated how rational decision-making and utility maximization could help explain crime, drug addiction, and lower fertility rates in America.<sup>4</sup> Inspired by Becker’s groundbreaking work, a small group of



scholars began producing literature that applies economic models to contemporary religious behavior and belief. The most prominent contributors in this group include Roger Finke, Rodney Stark, and Laurence Iannaccone.

The likely centerpiece of this body of literature is Roger Finke and Rodney Stark's book, *The Churching of America 1776 – 2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*. In their book, Finke and Stark challenge traditional interpretations of American religious history. Instead of focusing on changes in the religious demands of the American people as the source of an ever-changing religious landscape, the authors shift their focus to the religious institutions in America as the catalysts of religious change. The book outlines a comprehensive study of how supply-side economic theory and models can help explain changes in religious behavior and adherence, as well as the profound success of some religious institutions over others throughout American history. Through this study, Finke and Stark found that contrary to dominant academic thought, religion has been growing throughout American history rather than declining. The authors uncover that a large variety of new sects within Christianity were responsible for this religious growth but had gone largely unrecognized and unrecorded by mainstream histories. Finke and Stark claim that the success of these sectarian organizations was due to a free-market setting, aggressive marketing of their faith, and a commitment to vivid otherworldliness.<sup>5</sup> Individually, both authors have also produced many other works surrounding the application of economic theory to religion. According to other academics in the fields of economics, religion, and sociology, no one has been more closely associated to rational choice theories of religion than Rodney Stark. Stark has suggested that his work with Rational Choice Theory can be best understood as an effort to bring

deductive theory back into the service of scientifically grounded sociology.<sup>6</sup> Roger Finke is also a prominent scholar in this field who focuses especially on religious competition and the supply-side of religious change. Finally, Laurence Iannaccone is an established economist who applies rigorous economic techniques to the assessment of religion in order to make this sociocultural application of a rational model a substantial theory instead of simply a motif.<sup>7</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the application of economic theory to religious belief and practice is contentious for some people. Two distinct groups are often the main participants in the debate against this field. The first group consists of religious leaders and scholars who feel that the application of economic models to religion is minimizing to religion. The second group consists of secular scholars who believe that religious belief and behavior is largely irrational and therefore outside the scope of economic models. Ultimately, there has been more academic literature written by secular scholars questioning the rationality of religious belief and thought and the ability of economic models to explain it. Religious scholars and leaders, however, have voiced their concerns about the relatively new body of literature. Martin E. Marty, an American Lutheran religious scholar, for example stated that, “Finke and Stark’s world contains no God or religion or spirituality, no issue of truth or beauty or goodness, no faith or hope or love, no justice or mercy; only winning or losing in the churching game matters.”<sup>8</sup> While the critiques from religious leaders and scholars tend to take the form of more emotional arguments, the secular scholars tend to question the theoretical soundness of the application of economic theory to religion. Steve Bruce, an outspoken secularization theorist, argues that the fundamental idea behind Rational Choice Theory – that human behavior is driven by the desire to

maximize one's utility – does not work for religion because the conditions for rational choice are absent.<sup>9</sup> The conditions for rational choice that Bruce references are the ability to compare benefits of rival products and the ability to compare costs of rival products. Addressing his notion that the ability to compare benefits of rival religious products is absent, Bruce states that, "The truth of the competing core claims made by religions can be known only after death, on the Day of Judgment, or when the Messiah return. As of now, we have no way of knowing which, if any, is correct and, without knowing that, their other differences are trivial."<sup>10</sup> Then, when explaining his notion that the ability to distinguish between costs of religions is absent, Bruce states that talking about the price of religious involvement is, "stretching a metaphor too far."<sup>11</sup> Overall, Bruce makes the assessment that the nature of religion does not allow such comparison and measurements.

This thesis will stand on the side of the debate that supports the validity of using economic theory to describe and understand religious belief and behavior. In opposition to the arguments made by Marty and Bruce, this thesis will act to uncover explanations for religious change, while not make judgments about theological content, and the consumer's ability to compare beliefs and costs of religious products will be made evident. This thesis will build upon the work of Finke, Stark, and Iannaccone. Economic theories and models will be applied to religion with the underlying assumption that consumers engage in rational decision-making when deciding which tradition, denomination, or congregation to join. The guiding research question for this project is: How can the opposing trends of growth and decline within the Protestant tradition be understood? This thesis will use the theoretical groundwork of applying economic models to religion, but will also challenge and build upon those models and applications.

Ultimately, this thesis will contribute to the scholarly conversation on how economic theory can provide a new and informative insight into America's ever-changing religious landscape.

## **CHAPTER 1 – Economic Theory and How it Applies to Religion in America**

### Introduction

Scholars apply economic theory to religion in order to better understand, explain, and predict changes to religious practice within a larger social system. Although this methodology may seem implausible or abstract at first consideration, it becomes much more comprehensible when it is broken down into specific concepts and shown in real-life contexts. This first chapter will strive to make the application of economic theory to religion more comprehensible by contextualizing it in American societal history. In the first section of this chapter, Classical economic theory will be introduced and systematically applied to religion. In the next section, religious market place theory that existed in early America will be introduced. Then, the current status of America's religious economy will be outlined. After that, relatively recent government involvements in religion and their affects on America's religious economy will be described. In the final section of this chapter, the opinions of those who object to the methodology of applying economic theory to religion will be considered. Also in this section, it will be made abundantly clear that this thesis' objective is to use economic theory to better understand recent trends of religious change in America, not to make judgments on the content of religious theologies.

### Applying Fundamental Economic Theory to Religion

The possibilities in applying economic theory to religion are numerous. This section will focus on the most elemental applications of economic theory to religion in

order to build a fundamental understanding. First this section will review the principle of supply and demand, then economic market systems, and finally rational choice theory.

The most primary economy principles of supply and demand can be easily translated into the context of a religious economy. For a basic economy to exist there must be consumers who demand a certain product and producers who supply that product. In an economy's most natural state, equilibrium is reached when quantity demanded by consumers equals quantity supplied by producers.<sup>12</sup> Along with being its natural state, equilibrium is also an economy's most efficient state.<sup>13</sup> This is because, at equilibrium the producers have supplied an appropriate amount of product to satisfy the consumers' demand – nothing is wasted or unsatisfied. These same principles are reflected in a religious economy. In a religious economy, everyday people are the consumers and religious organizations are the producers. Similar to a traditional producer, religious organizations produce a product that satisfies the demands of religious consumers. The products that religious organizations produce are memberships.<sup>14</sup> These memberships give consumers access to the variety of religious and social services that each religious organization offers. Identical to a traditional economy, a religious economy is at its natural and most efficient state when the quantity of religious product supplied equals the quantity of religious product demanded.

Within economic theory there exists a variety of different economic systems. A main variant between these systems is the degree of government involvement within them.<sup>15</sup> The spectrum of such involvement goes from two extremes – absolutely no government involvement to complete government control. On the side of absolutely no government involvement is the free market system. In a free market economy,

competition between producers is unregulated and consumers freely choose between products based on their unique demands.<sup>16</sup> In order to succeed in this system, a producer must produce a product that is at least as attractive to consumers as the other competitors' products.<sup>17</sup> In Classical economic theory, the free market economy is the most efficient economic system because, without the influence of outside intervention, the market will settle at a natural equilibrium where quantity supplied equals quantity demanded.<sup>18</sup> On the side of complete government control is the command economy. In a command economy, the government makes all the decisions surrounding the type and quantity of products produced. The consumers' choices are limited to what the government decides to produce. In Classical economic theory, the command economy is the least efficient economic system because government intervention often prevents the market from settling at its natural equilibrium.<sup>19</sup> Lastly, the economic system that rests in the middle of the spectrum between no government involvement and total government involvement is the mixed market economy. A mixed market economy is strongly influenced by the free market system but includes varying degrees and types of government involvement.<sup>20</sup> Governments make some decisions that affect the economy (often to preserve the rights and freedoms of the society) but the producers are significantly less regulated than in a command economy and the consumers remain largely free to choose between products based on their unique demands. This economic system demonstrates varying results when it comes to efficiency. Depending on the types of government interventions made in the economy, a mixed market system can vary between high efficiency and low efficiency.

Different religious economies can also be categorized under the three market systems of economic theory. The degree of government involvement in religious

economies, much like traditional economies, can profoundly affect producer incentives, consumer options, and the overall equilibrium of the market.<sup>21</sup> In a free market religious economy religious producers compete freely against each other in order to attract religious consumers to their product. Religious consumers are free to choose which religious product, if any, they will adhere to. Like a traditional free market economy, the free market religious economy is the most efficient system because the demands of religious consumers are adequately met by the supply of religious producers. Also in this religious economic system there exists the most religious variety and plurality. This is because new religious producers are free to enter the market and satisfy a religious need that was previously unsatisfied. This essential feature of a free market religious economy allows it to be the most efficient system because the religious demands of the consumers are being met to the best of producers' abilities. By comparison, in a command religious economy the government strictly regulates the religious products available to religious consumers. Most commonly in this religious economic system, there is one state-sponsored religion that acts as the sole religious producer in the market. If consumers choose to adhere to a religious product, this state-sponsored religious product is their only option. Like a traditional command economy, the command religious economy is the least efficient because government intervention prevents the diverse religious demands of consumers to be met by a sufficient variety of religious producers. It is simply impossible for one religious congregation to satisfy all of the unique religious demands present within a religious economy – no matter the size of that economy. Lastly, in a mixed market religious economy there is significant carryover from a free market religious economy but there are also varying degrees and types of government involvement in the



economy. The government can become involved in a religious economy in two ways – by either implementing regulations or by providing subsidies.<sup>22</sup> Government implemented regulations in a religious economy restrict certain religious producers from producing their product while government implemented subsidies artificially support certain religious producers and the production of their product. In this religious economy system, however, consumers are generally freer to choose between religious products according to their unique religious demands. Like a traditional mixed market economy, the mixed market religious economy's efficiency varies. The religious economy's ability to find equilibrium between religious demand and religious supply is dependent on the degree and type of government restrictions or subsidies. In Classical economic theory, however, the religious economy will never be able to reach a true equilibrium while government interventions are present in the market.

Finally, as outlined in the introduction chapter, the majority of contemporary academic literature that applies economic theory to religion utilizes Rational Choice Theory as its theoretical backbone. In the context of a religious economy, this theory infers that consumers assess the various religious products available to them, and choose the option that maximizes benefits to them and best satisfies their personal preferences. Similar to Finke and Stark's, *The Churching of America*, this thesis will rely heavily on the application of Rational Choice Theory to religion and the notion that religious consumers act in order to best maximize their benefits and unique preferences.

### Religious Marketplace Theory in Early America

The application of economic theory and principles to better understand and explain changes to religious adherence in America is a methodology with a much longer history than many realize. Many assume that this methodology originated from what they perceive to be a recent and widespread trend of secularization in American society. Economic explanations of religious change in America, however, were used commonly in the nineteenth century when European scholars and church leaders visited America to observe the country's new and innovative religious system. These scholars used explicit economic terms to describe the striking and fervent religious atmosphere that existed in the United States. They spoke openly and in detail about the emergence about a new economic religious system in America that allowed upstart sects to compete freely with older religious bodies.<sup>23</sup> As one European writer, Francis Grund, pithily stated, "In America, every clergyman may be said to do business on his own account, and under his own firm. He alone is responsible for any deficiency in the discharge of his office, as he alone is entitled to all the credit due to his extensions."<sup>24</sup> Many European visitors, including the extensively celebrated Alexis de Tocqueville, attributed the open competition between congregations, the multitude of sects, and the zeal of clergy and their members that existed in America to the complete separation of church and state enforced by the United States Constitution.<sup>25</sup> These scholars claimed that the lack of government involvement in American religion was ultimately responsible for the free and competitive nature of the religious economy. The system of religious economy that these early European scholars and church leaders were describing America to have was a free market religious economy. As explained in an earlier section, a truly free market religious

economy has zero government involvement, which allows religious producers to compete freely against each other and consumers to freely choose which religious product, if any, they will adhere to. Although the European visitors tended to portray America's early free market religious economy positively, the system eventually turned out not to be sustainable or practical for a modern society. Like a traditional free market economy, a free market religious economy can be a particularly brutal system that does not necessarily protect the rights or freedoms of people. In this laissez-faire system, the most efficient producer will always triumph, which most often does not leave room for appropriate social protection measures. Over time, American's religious economy has shifted closer to the center of the economic system spectrum in order to better protect the religious rights and freedoms of the American people.

#### The Current Status of America's Religious Economy

The current status of America's religious economy no longer reflects the purely free market system of its earlier days. American legislative rhetoric surrounding religious practice, however, suggests that strong tendencies toward a free-market religious system still remain. The United States Constitution's First Amendment states that, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of a religion, or prohibiting the free exercise of." This statement confirms that the American government cannot establish an official federal or state religion and that the government's legislators cannot make laws that purposely inhibit people's ability to practice their own religion. Although this clause is firmly in place to protect free religious exercise and keep the enterprises of religious organization and government distinct, there still exists a great amount of controversy

surrounding the distinction of church and state in American society today.<sup>26</sup> Countless Americans face conflict between their religious beliefs and their responsibilities as a civil citizen. These conflicts create difficult questions of when or whether it is appropriate for the government to intervene in religious affairs to either allow or prohibit religious practices. Should legislatures and courts allow exceptions to the laws of society in order to preserve a religious organization's free practice or should legislators and courts stay strictly committed to a universal standard and maintain all laws, even if they sometimes inhibit the free practice of certain religious organizations? This question has arisen several times in the recent history of American courts. A few recent examples of this dilemma have been: whether members of a church should be allowed to ingest a prohibited drug as the center of their worship service, whether parents should be allowed to withdraw their children from school before they are sixteen so they may undertake vocational training for their communal life, and whether laws that forbid gender discrimination in employment leave untouched religious groups that permit only men to the clergy.<sup>27</sup> Given the fact that courts and legislators have given favor to both sides – making exception to societal laws in order to allow the religious marketplace operate freely and intervening to prohibit some religious practices – it can be assessed that there exists a mixed market religious economy in the United States today. As explained in an earlier section, a mixed market religious economy is strongly based on the free market religious system but also includes varying degrees and types of government involvement. A mixed market religious economy's level of efficiency – or the extent to which religious suppliers adequately meet religious demands – is dependent on the type and degree of government intervention. Logically, the extent to which religious suppliers are able to

meet religious demand should significantly affect the amount of religious adherence within a society. If the religious products available to a consumer do not meet that consumer's unique demands, that consumer is much less likely to adhere to one of the available products. Therefore, the more efficient the religious economy, the more religious adherents there will be in any given society. For these reasons, along with understanding the current status of America's religious economy, it is also important to consider specific government interventions and their substantial affects on the religious economy when investigating recent religious growth and decline in America.

#### Recent Government Involvement in the American Religious Economy

Since the year 2007, there have been three United States Supreme Court cases involving religious establishment or free exercise.<sup>28</sup> Only one of these rulings, however, is thought to have had a significant impact on religious growth and decline in American since 2007. This ruling was the result of the Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. EEOC case of 2011. In conclusion to this case, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that religious organizations are exempt from federal discrimination laws when hiring or firing clergy and other employees who perform religious duties.<sup>29</sup> This ruling is significant because it makes an exception to societal laws in order for religious organizations to operate in closer accordance with their religious doctrines. For example, many conservative Christian denominations in America believe that sections within the Bible specifically state that women are prohibited from becoming religious teachers or leaders. Given the Supreme Courts ruling, the United States government can no longer force these conservative denominations to consider women for these religious

positions because religious organizations are exempt from discrimination laws. The Lutheran Church and School v. EEOC ruling abolishes a government restriction that formerly affected the religious economy in America. Religious producers are now able to operate more freely but it comes at a cost to America people's rights and freedoms. This example demonstrates the difficult balance between free market efficiency, appropriate government interventions, and larger societal norms that mixed market religious economies are forced to negotiate. Although the described ruling was intended to uphold free exercise of religion and promote free market efficiency by allowing religious producers to make decisions freely, it comes with the dark underbelly of allowing discrimination in the hiring or firing process of church employees. Decisions about government intervention in the religious economy are important to note because they can have profound affects on incentives and opportunities available to the religious producer and by extension on the growth and decline of religion in America.

### Objections to Applying Economic Theory to Religion

The application of economic theory to religious practice is not a universally accepted or celebrated methodology. As outlined in the pervious chapter's literature review, there are scholars and religious leaders who strongly oppose the application of economic theories and models to religion. The groups who oppose this methodology, however, have very different opinions of why applying economic theory to religion is problematic. One group, consisting of mainly religious scholars and leaders, feel that this methodology is merely another attempt to conceptualize religion within the domain of human understanding – which, they believe, will always fail. Similar to Durkheim's

dichotomist theory of the sacred and the profane, these critics insist that religion and interests of the group are distinctly separate and incomparable to economic theory and mundane concerns of the individual.<sup>30</sup> Religious leaders and scholars who oppose the use of economic principles to explain religious change feel that this methodology ultimately minimizes religion by associating it with everyday transactional behavior rather than otherworldly experiences. A complete division of the sacred and the profane is important to these critics because it better maintains religion's otherworldly purity and superiority over the selfish behavior that is associated with secular theory. Another group, consisting of mainly secular theorists, however, oppose the application of economic theory and models to religion because they perceive religious practice and belief as completely irrational. Since these critics view religious behavior as irrational, it is problematic for them to apply rational models and theory to attempt to explain these behaviors. Economic theories and models include the underlying assumption that people act to maximize their utility, if this assumption is not also present in people's decisions about their religious practices and beliefs, the rational models and theories will not accurately explain or predict religious behaviors.

These objections to the application of economic theory to religion are legitimate and deserve to be adequately addressed. Though, as rational choice theorists Finke and Stark have pointed out, "economic principles will serve as tools for understanding religious change, but imply nothing about the merits of such change."<sup>31</sup> As Finke and Stark have made abundantly clear in their work with Rational Choice Theory and religious change in America since the colonial period, using economic theory to explain changing trends of religious adherence does not imply anything negative or positive

about a particular religion or its theology. In this thesis, the same precedent is continued.

Economic theory is simply used as a method of better understanding religious change.

The use of economic theory in this thesis should not be interpreted as a commentary promoting the association between religion and profane behavior.



## **CHAPTER 2 – Theories of Religious Change and Recent Shifts in America’s Religious Landscape**

### Introduction

In the academic field of Religious Studies, scholars use theory to better contextualize, explain, and even predict changes to religiosity within a society. This chapter will begin with a section that defines two major strands of religious theory – one that employs demand-side explanations and another that employs supply-side explanations. The strand of religious theory that employs supply-side explanation will occupy the main focus of this thesis. In the next section, the Sect-Church Process Theory will be described and analyzed. This well-established theory will be used as the building block and inspiration for the thesis’ new theory of religious change. Following the overview of the Sect-Church Process theory, the next section will introduce the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory. This new theory will build upon the Sect-Church Process Theory by striving to address unanswered questions by highlighting the important, yet previously under-appreciated, relationship between a religious organization’s degree of tension with society and its congregational attendance. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a section that summarizes recently published reports on religiosity in the United States by the Pew Research Center. These reports will bring attention to recent and significant shifts within America’s religious economy.

### Supply-Side Explanations vs. Demand-Side Explanations

Explanations of fluctuations in religious activity and adherence over history have conventionally focused on the public's changing demand for religion.<sup>32</sup> For example, religious historians have deemed, and continue to describe, the increased revivalism in America during the eighteenth and nineteenth century as "Great Awakenings". According to these historians, the dramatically increased revivalist behavior during these periods was driven by Americans' demand for new worldviews that were more consistent with the existing political and economic environment.<sup>33</sup> Using the term "awakening" to describe these periods suggests that scholars of general American religious history view these times as periods of aroused demand for religion.<sup>34</sup> They tend to assume that religious change occurs solely in response to the shifting desires and needs of religious consumers. Rational choice theorists of religion, however, look for more holistic explanations to describe the shifting patterns of religious adherence in American history. These theorists turn the conventional assumptions of religious historians on their heads and assert that, "the most significant changes in American religion derive from shifting supply, not shifting demand."<sup>35</sup> In the example of the American Great Awakening periods, rational choice theorists of religion would point out that before and during the Great Awakening periods colonial establishments had lost support, which allowed upstart sects to gain more freedoms and abilities to start their congregations.<sup>36</sup> The lifting of restrictions on sects resulted in an influx of diverse religious producers.<sup>37</sup> This influx of diverse religious producers created greater plurality within the religious economy, which in turn allowed for a larger variety of religious demands to be more specifically satisfied. When religious consumers' demands are more specifically satisfied, it gives them a

greater incentive to adhere to a religious product. So naturally, there will be higher rates of religious adherence in a more pluralistic religious economy because a greater number of religious consumers are having their demands satisfied by the variety of religious products available. Thus, early American sectarian religion flourished in response to religious deregulation instead of a shifting religious demand.<sup>38</sup> This supply-side explanation of the fluctuation in religious adherence during the Great Awakening periods is much more comprehensive and theoretically satisfying than the traditional speculations over a shifting religious demand. The spike in religious adherence in America during the Great Awakening periods, and many other important religious periods, was due to a change in incentives and opportunities facing religious producers, not a sudden and dramatic shift in the material or psychological state of religious consumers.<sup>39</sup>

This thesis will focus on supply-side explanations to religious change in America due to supply-side explanations' more comprehensive and more theoretically satisfying nature. This focus of religious supply, however, is not meant to completely discount the importance of religious demand in shaping the religious economy in America. Without doubt, religious markets – like any other market – respond to the equilibrating forces of both supply and demand.<sup>40</sup> However, rational choice theorists of religion have found throughout history that religious demand proves to be much more stable than religious supply.<sup>41</sup> These theorists suspect this to occur because, “the underlying determinants of religious demand – people’s tastes, beliefs, socialization, and so forth – are rooted in fundamental human needs, whereas religious supply is strongly affected by governmental policy.”<sup>42</sup> It is for these reasons that this thesis will endeavor to find supply-side

explanations for the recent religious adherence fluctuations between the Protestant traditions in America.

### Sect-Church Process Theory

A prominent theory that embodies supply-side explanations for religious change is the Sect-Church Process Theory. This theory has been developed by rational choice theorists of religion and is an important feature of much of the literature that uses economic theory to understand religious growth and decline. One of the most recognized works that utilizes the Sect-Church theory is Roger Finke and Rodney Stark's book, *The Churching of America 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*. In their book, Finke and Stark describe their interpretation of the Sect-Church process and use it to explain historical and contemporary religious growth and decline in America.

According to Finke and Stark, the two primary forms of religious organizations – churches and sects – can be thought of as the end points on a continuum that depicts the degree of tension between religious organizations and the sociocultural contexts in which they exist.<sup>43</sup> Tension is created when a religious organization's teaching, beliefs, or practices differ from the dominant traditions of its sociocultural surroundings. When the religious organization's teachings, beliefs, or practices align with the traditions of its sociocultural surroundings, no tension will exist. On Finke and Stark's continuum, churches are the religious organizations in a relatively low state of tension with their sociocultural surroundings while sects are the religious organizations that are in a relatively high state of tension with their sociocultural surroundings.<sup>44</sup> To begin the Sect-Church process, new religious organizations nearly always start on the sectarian side of

the continuum. Over time, if these religious organizations become successful at attracting membership, they will almost inevitably lessen their degree of tension with society and shift to the church side of the continuum.<sup>45</sup> When religious organizations move from a high degree of tension with their sociological surroundings to a low degree of tension, however, they sacrifice their ability to satisfy the demands of members who prefer a high-tension version of the faith.<sup>46</sup> The high-tension members' dissatisfaction will eventually erupt into a separation, where the members desiring a return to a high degree of tension with the sociological surroundings will organize a faction and leave to found their own sect.<sup>47</sup> Eventually, if that faction is successful at attracting membership it too will begin the Sect-Church process.<sup>48</sup> Collectively, these actions result in an endless cycle of sect formation, transformation to churches, and church splintering.

The Sect-Church Process Theory is a valuable progression model that helps explain how tension with sociocultural surroundings defines the type of religious organization and how these religious organizations have tended to evolve over the course of American religious history. The Sect-Church process, however, leaves some essential questions unanswered. It does not explain why religious organizations eventually move towards a low degree of tension with society, how congregational attendances are affected by a religious organization's degree of tension with society, and what religious organizations sacrifice when they have no tension with dominant culture. This thesis will attempt to develop a new theory that builds off the Sect-Church theory and endeavors to answer the questions that the Sect-Church theory leaves unanswered.

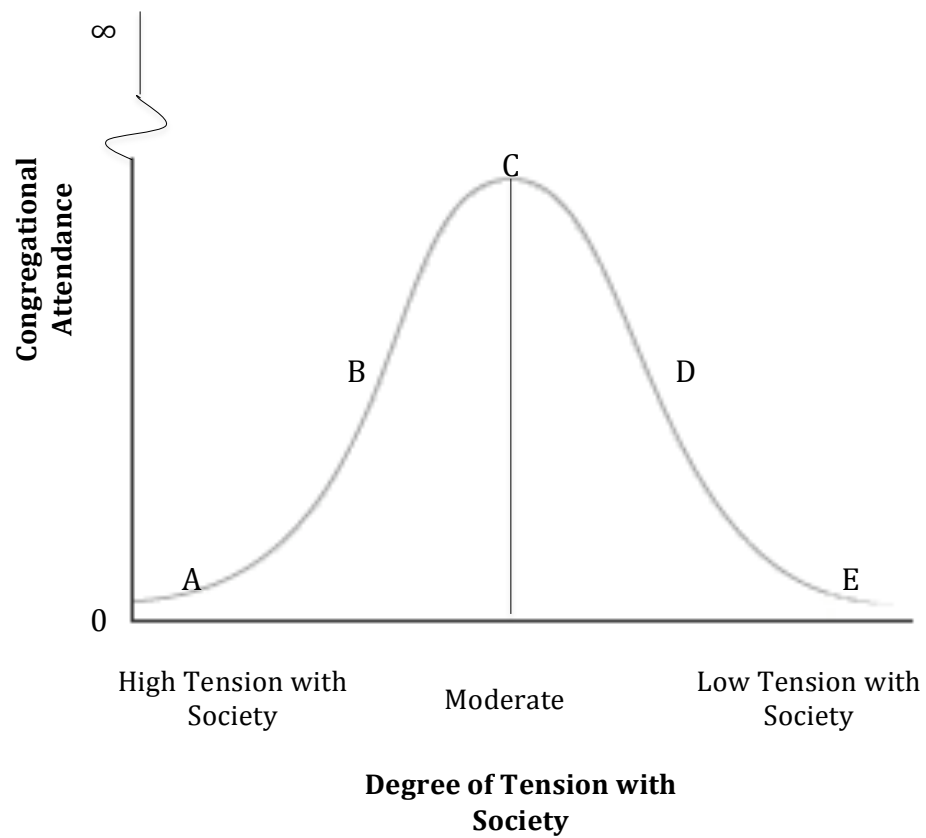
### Bell Curve Theory of Religious Growth and Decline

The theory that this thesis proposes to “fill in the gaps” of the Sect-Church theory is called the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory. The Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory utilizes the Sect-Church Process Theory in that different religious organizations have differing degrees of tension with their sociocultural surroundings. This new theory, however, focuses on the relationship between a religious organization’s degree of tension with society and its congregational attendance rates. By focusing on this relationship, the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory strives to answer the following questions: Why do religious organizations tend to develop in the direction of low tension with society? Why do religious organizations continue to lessen their degree of tension with society to become more aligned with dominant culture even after their attendance rates have been sacrificed? And finally, why do religious organizations with either extremely high or extremely low degrees of tension with society have the lowest attendances? Before these questions are addressed, however, the fundamentals of the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory must be explained.

The central premise of the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory is that a religious organization’s degree of tension with society and their congregational attendances are not directly proportional. In other words, these two variables do not move at an equal ratio to each other. When a religious organization’s degree of tension with society is either extremely high or extremely low its congregational attendance will be extremely low and its percent change in congregation attendance will be zero. When a religious organization’s degree of tension with society is moderate, however, its congregational attendance will be at its zenith while its percent change in congregational

attendance will be zero. If a religious organization shifts its degree of tension with society from high towards moderate, its congregational attendance will rise and its percent change in congregational attendance will become positive. If a religious organization shifts its degree of tension with society from moderate towards low, its congregational attendance will fall and its percent change in congregational attendance will become negative. It is helpful to conceptualize this complex relationship between degree of tension with society, congregational attendance, and percent change in congregational attendance as a series of bell curve shapes – giving the theory its name.

**Figure 1.0 Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory**



**Figure 1.1 Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory**

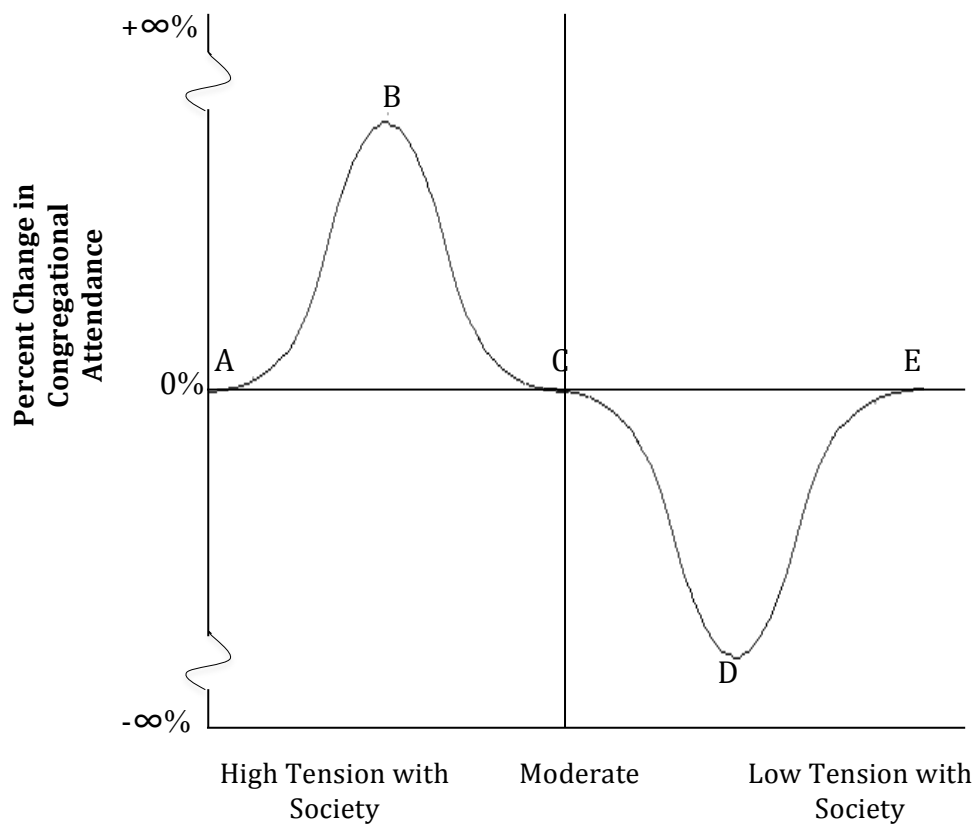




Figure 1.0 provides a visual representation of the relationship between a religious organization's degree of tension with society and its congregational attendance. The y-axis of Figure 1.0 represents congregational attendance for religious organizations and ranges from zero to infinity. The x-axis of Figure 1.0 represents the degree of tension religious organizations have with society and ranges from high tension to moderate tension to low tension. The lettered points on Figure 1.0 represent the different relationships a religious organization could possibly have between their degree of tension with society and their congregational attendance. At point A, a religious organization has an extremely high degree of tension with society, which results in an extremely low congregational attendance. At point E a religious organization has an extremely low degree of tension with society, which also results in an extremely low congregational attendance. Relative to point A and E, religious organizations at points B and D are closer to a moderate degree of tension with society. Due to their relatively more moderate degrees of tension with society, religious organization at points B and D have relatively higher congregational attendances than religious organizations at points A and E. A religious organization existing at point C, however, has the highest congregational attendance because it has a moderate degree of tension with society. If a religious organization were to begin at point A with a high degree of tension with society and then lessen its tension with society to a moderate degree, it would shift to point C and its congregational attendance would rise. However, if that same religious organization were to continue to lessen its degree of tension with society, its congregational attendance would not continue to rise. The religious organization would shift to point D and its congregation attendance would drop. Figure 1.0 provides a clear visual demonstration of

the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory's central premise that a religious organization's degree of tension with society and their congregational attendances are not directly proportional.

Figure 1.1 provides a visual representation of the relationship between a religious organizations degree of tension with society and its percent change in congregational attendance. Figure 1.1 was created by conceptually taking the first derivative of Figure 1.0, which essentially measures the rate of growth or decline at any point on Figure 1.0. Therefore, points on Figure 1.0 can be transferred to Figure 1.1 in order to demonstrate the rate at which a religious organization is either growing or declining at those specific points. The y-axis of Figure 1.1 represents percent change in congregational attendance and ranges from negative infinity to positive infinity. The x-axis of Figure 1.1 represents the degree of tension religious organizations have with society and ranges from high tension to low tension. The lettered points on Figure 1.1 equal the equivalent points on Figure 1.0. Instead of demonstrating possible relationships religious organizations could have between their degree of tension with society and their congregational attendance, the lettered points on Figure 1.1 demonstrate the possible relationships religious organizations could have between their degree of tension with society and their percent change in congregational attendance. At point A on Figure 1.1, a religious organization has an extremely high degree of tension with society, which results in a zero percent change in congregational attendance. Figure 1.1's demonstration of high-tension organizations' zero percent change in congregational attendance is reflected in Figure 1.0's demonstration of high-tension organizations' low congregational attendances. At point E on Figure 1.1, a religious organization has an extremely low degree of tension

with society, which also results in a zero percent change in congregational attendance. Again, Figure 1.1's demonstration of low-tension organizations' zero percent change in congregational attendance is reflected in Figure 1.0's demonstration of low-tension organizations' low congregational attendances. Points B and D on Figure 1.1 represent a religious organization's most rapid rates of percent change in congregational attendance. On Figure 1.0, points B and D are located on the graph's steepest positive and negative slopes. This translates to the most rapid positive and negative percent changes in congregational attendance on Figure 1.1. A religious organization existing at point C on Figure 1.1 has a zero percent change in congregational attendance. This is because the religious organization is at its maximum congregational attendance, which is demonstrated by point C on Figure 1.0. If a religious organization were to begin at point A on Figure 1.1 with a high degree of tension with society and then lessen its degree of tension to a moderate degree, it would shift to point C and its percent change in congregational attendance would become positive. However, if that same religious organization were to continue to lessen its degree of tension with society, its percent change in congregational attendance would not continue to stay positive. The religious organization would shift to point D and its percent change in congregational attendance would become negative. Figure 1.1 provides further insight into the dynamics of the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory by visually representing the complexities of change in congregational attendance.

Now that the theoretical aspects of the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory have been outlined, the questions left unanswered by the Sect-Church Process Theory can be addressed. The first unanswered question that the Religious Adherence Bell Curve

Theory addresses is why do religious organizations tend to develop in the direction of low tension with society? The Sect-Church Process Theory states that as religious organizations become more successful at attracting membership, they will inevitably lessen their degree of tension with society and transform into churches. This theory, however, seldom attempts to address the reason why religious organizations lessen their degree of tension with society. One could claim that such a shift is religious consumer driven because there are more and more people involved with the religious organization as it grows, and the adherents will naturally begin to embody and demand a greater variety of beliefs and opinions. This explanation, however, is demand-side focused and does not consider the possibility that religious producers could be making a conscious decision to adapt their practices, teachings, and central beliefs to closer reflect dominant culture in order to accelerate the attraction on religious consumers. The Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory takes a supply-side oriented approach in addressing the question of why religious organizations tend to develop in the direction of low tension with society. It considers how a religious organization's degree of tension with society is linked to congregational attendance and what decisions religious organizations may be incentivized to make.

As established in the first chapter, America's mixed market religious economy system creates a highly competitive environment between religious producers. Each religious producer's product must be at least as attractive as other religious products in order to attract consumers. Religious producers have an incentive to attract as many consumers to their product as possible because high congregational attendance legitimizes an organization, makes it sustainable, and extends its impact on greater

society. Therefore, religious producers who react to this incentive are continually looking for the fastest and most efficient ways to encourage adherence to their products and increase their congregational attendance. Logically, in order to attract a greater number of consumers to a product, the producer must broaden the product's appeal to a larger population of consumers. In a religious context, producers often find that the fastest and easiest way to broaden a religious product's appeal to a larger population of consumers is to lessen the religious organization's degree of tension with society. When a religious organization lessens its degree of tension with society, its practices, teachings, and central beliefs must adapt to closer reflect the dominant culture of society. This process initially broadens a product's appeal because it becomes in less conflict with the norms of dominant culture – making it more palatable to a larger population of consumers. In summary, religious organizations tend to develop in the direction of low tension with society because they have an incentive to increase their congregational attendance. As seen on Figure 1.0, when a religious organization shifts from point A with high tension towards point C with moderate tension, that organization's congregational attendance increases significantly.

However, as this theory continually stresses, the relationship between a religious organization's degree of tension with society and its congregational attendance is not directly proportional. A religious organization's congregational attendance will not continue to increase as it continues to lessen its degree of tension with society. This then begs the question; why do religious organizations continue to lessen their degree of tension with society and become more aligned with dominant culture even after their congregational attendance numbers have been sacrificed? The answer to this question can

be found on the y-axis of the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory's Figure 1.1 – percent change in congregational attendance. Percent change in congregational attendance is a measure of sustained growth or decline in a religious organization. Due to its measurement of sustained trends, percent change in congregational attendance will drop far before congregational attendance will be noticeably affected. This reality can be visually demonstrated by comparing Figure 1.0 and Figure 1.1. In Figure 1.0, the slope of the curve between point A and C is constantly positive. This slope indicates an increasing number in congregational attendance between point A and C. In Figure 1.1, however, the slope of the curve between point A and C is positive, zero, and negative. This slope indicates that percent change in congregational attendance does not continue to increase all the way from point A to C, instead percent change in congregational attendance will first increase from zero, then level out, and finally decrease back to zero. By comparing Figure 1.0 and Figure 1.1, it is clear that measuring percent increase in congregational attendance indicates slowed growth of a religious organization far before measuring congregational attendance indicates slowed growth. Once religious organizations experience a drop in congregational attendance, their percent change in congregational attendance has already become negative. At this point, it is much more difficult to move backwards by increase their degree of tension with society – this is partly because the religious organization has reached a size that does not allow it to be nimble or easily change central teaching, practices, or beliefs. Religious organizations continue to lessen their degree of tension with society because the initial gains of the process blind the organization from the more subtle losses of present change in congregational attendance.

Finally, it is important for the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory to address why religious organizations with either extremely high or extremely low degrees of tension with society have the lowest attendance rates. Although Figure 1.0 is able to visually demonstrate this relationship, it does not fully explain why high-tension religious organizations tend to have substantially lower congregational attendances than organizations with moderate degrees of tension with society. An explanation to this question, however, remains an essential part of this theory because it further verifies the claim that the relationship between a religious organization's degree of tension with society and its congregation attendance or percent change in congregational attendance is not directly proportional. Firstly, religious organizations with a high degree of tension with society aim to satisfy a niche religious demand and therefore appeal to a much smaller population of consumers. Since these religious organizations go against the grain of dominant culture and consequentially are more demanding of their members, there will be inherently fewer consumers willing to adhere to their religious products. As religious organizations with a high degree of tension move closer to a moderate degree of tension with society, they begin to loosen the demands they put on their members and align closer to the norms of society. In turn, this shift will broaden the appeal of these religious organizations' products to a larger population of consumers. Conversely, religious organizations with a low degree of tension with society aim to satisfy an extremely broad variety of religious demands and therefore attempt to have possible appeal to a very broad population of consumers. At first consideration, it may seem like these religious organization should have the highest congregational attendance numbers because they seek the broadest appeal. This, however, is not the case because these religious

organizations fail to satisfy any specific demands, by attempting to satisfy all demands, and have placed themselves in competition with a much broader variety of organization. By attempting to satisfy all demands, extremely low-tension religious organizations become so adapted to dominant culture that the central teachings, practices, and beliefs of the two groups are essentially the same. Without any tension between the religious organization and dominant culture, the religious organization becomes comparable to and in competition with any other extremely low-tension religious organization or even a secular organization. Along with this heightened competition for extremely low-tension organization, consumers can also shift frequently and easily between them or simply choose not to adhere to any of them because the consumer's specific demands or needs are not exclusively satisfied by any one organization. By eliminating all tension with society, these organizations become essentially expendable. Specifically in the case of religious organizations, extremely low tension with society ultimately causes religiosity to be lost. Purely religious belief focuses on otherworldly matters, which cannot exist when teachings, practices, and central beliefs are too closely or exactly aligned with dominant secular culture in American society.

The Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory is intended to be a simplified model that serves to clarify some of the reasons behind trends of religious growth and decline in America. In no way does this model account for all the intricacies and complexities of a real-life situation. In reality, a religious organization's degree of tension with society is unquantifiable, influenced by an infinite number of variables, and constantly changing. Also, a religious organization's degree of tension with society is not the sole determinant of that religious organization's congregational attendance or the percent change in



congregational attendance. Reflecting an exact reality, however, is not the objective of the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory. The objective of this theory is to focus on the specific relationship between a religious organization's degree of tension with society and their congregational attendance. The theory strives to distill the nature of this relationship by highlighting the effects tension with society has on a congregation's attendance. The simplified environment that the religious adherence bell curve creates allows one to momentarily quiet the surrounding noise of real-life complications and focus on how a specific relationship is having a profound impact on religious change in America.

#### Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study

The Religious Landscape Study (RLS) is a nationally representative survey administered by the Pew Research Center that gathers a variety of information about religion and religious adherence in the United States. The study is the product of over 35,000 telephone interviews with adult U.S. citizens from all fifty states. The interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish on both cellphones and landlines. The RLS has been conducted twice by the Pew Research Center – for the first time in 2007 and the second time in 2014. Both studies administered a nearly identical set of questions and conducted a similar amount of telephone interviews. In both the 2007 and 2014 studies, the Pew Research Center claimed the margins of error to be less than one percent for the full sample. This small margin of error makes it possible to identify relatively small changes in religious groups' market share of the U.S. population. However, it is important to keep in mind that larger margins of error will apply when considering the

characteristics of smaller religious groups. Before the Pew Research Center's RLS – and a handful of other studies from independent organizations – information about religious adherence in the United States was lacking. There are no recent official government statistics on religious adherence in America because the U.S. census no longer asks citizens about their religion. Some religious organizations keep track of their own membership rates, but they use widely varying criteria and sometimes do not remove members who move to a different religious organization or leave religion completely. Experts also state that when general public surveys include questions about religious adherence, they typically do not survey enough people or ask sufficiently detailed question in order to comprehensively describe America's religious landscape. Due to the lack of accurate and comprehensive information, the RLS plays a very important role in providing information about religion and religious adherence in the United States. By providing nearly identical surveys conducted seven years apart, the Pew Research Center's RLS gives scholars the ability to recognize and track shifts in religion and trends in religious adherence within America.

To date, there have been two reports published by the Pew Research Center that highlight the findings of the RLS. The first report was published on May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015 and is entitled, *America's Changing Religious Landscape*. The second report was published on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015 and is entitled, *U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious*. The first report focused on the demographics of religion in America while the second report focused on the beliefs and attitudes of religious and nonreligious adherents in America.

The major findings of the first RLS report were that the Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the unaffiliated – those who do not identify with any

organized religion – is growing. These shifts are affecting all regions of the country and taking place in many demographic groups. The trends are particularly pronounced among young adults, but are also occurring among Americans of all ages. These same trends are seen among whites, blacks, and Latinos; college graduates as well as adults with only high school education; and among men as well as women. Undeniably, Christianity remains the most predominant religion in the United States with a majority of citizens continuing to identify with some branch of the Christian faith. However, the RLS found that between 2007 and 2014 the Christian share of the population fell from 78.4% to 70.6%. This fall was driven mainly by declines among mainline Protestants and Catholics. On the other hand, over the same time period the religiously unaffiliated jumped from 16.1% to 22.8%.

The major findings of the second RLS report were that although there has been a modest drop in the overall rates of belief and practice of religion, religiously affiliated Americans are as observant as before. The RLS found that the percentage of American adults who say that they believe in God, pray daily, and regularly go to church or other religious services all have declined modestly from 2007 to 2014. But the Pew Research Center study also found a great deal of stability in the U.S. religious landscape. The report claims that the recent decrease in religious beliefs and behaviors was largely driven by the “nones”, a growing minority of Americans who do not belong to an organized religion. Being a religious none is most common within the Millennial generation. Among the approximately three-quarters of American adults who identify with a religion, however, there has been no discernible drop in most measures of religious

commitment. Furthermore, by some measures, religiously affiliated Americans are even more devout in 2014 than they were in 2007.

Although all the findings of the RLS reports are fascinating and unquestionably important, they are immense and admittedly past the possible scope of examination for this thesis project. For this reason, this thesis project will focus on the trends of religious adherence within the Protestant tradition in the United States. During the seven-year gap between the first and second RLS, the Protestant tradition lost its majority market share within the United States. In the 2007 RLS, 51.3% of American adults identified as Protestants. By the 2014 RLS, 46.5% of American adults identified as Protestants. This trend of decline, however, was not consistent across the entire Protestant tradition. Within the Protestant tradition there are a substantial number of diverse denominations that can be better categorized and understood within more specific traditions. This thesis will concentrate on the two most significant Protestant traditions – the mainline and the evangelical. Both of these traditions are made up of numerous denominations that share similarities in their teaching, practices, central beliefs, and histories.

The mainline Protestant tradition experienced more dramatic declines, with their market share of American adults dropping from 18.1% in 2007 to 14.7% in 2014.

Although less pronounced, the evangelical tradition also experienced decline in market share of American adults with a drop from 26.3% in 2007 to 25.4% in 2014. It is also important to note that significant market share shifts took place within the larger Protestant tradition. Among Protestant American adults, the evangelical tradition gained market share going from 31% in 2007 to 35% in 2014 while the mainline tradition lost market share going from 35% in 2007 to 32% in 2014. For more specific information on

shifting market shares within the Protestant tradition, Figures 2.0 and 2.1 have been included. Figures 2.0 and 2.1 provide the market shares of prominent Protestant denominations among the entire adult American population, the adult Protestant population, and the more specific Protestant traditions' populations. This information is helpful to conceptualizing the shifts that have occurred on a broad level to the Protestant tradition as well as on a very specific level to the various denominations. This information will also be referenced in future chapters of this thesis that speak specifically about the mainline and evangelical Protestant traditions.

**Figure 2.0<sup>49</sup>**

## Large Denominations and Protestant Religious Traditions

	Among total population		Among all Protestants		Among evangelical tradition		Among mainline tradition		Among historically black Prot. tradition	
	2007	2014	2007	2014	2007	2014	2007	2014	2007	2014
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Baptist</b>	<b>17.2</b>	<b>15.4</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>63</b>
Southern Baptist Convention	6.7	5.3	13	11	26	21	0	0	0	0
Independent Baptist in evang. trad.	2.5	2.5	5	5	10	10	0	0	0	0
American Baptist Churches USA	1.2	1.5	2	3	0	0	7	10	0	0
National Baptist Convention	1.8	1.4	3	3	0	0	0	0	26	22
Progressive Baptist Convention	0.3	0.3	*	1	0	0	0	0	4	4
Missionary Baptist in hist. black trad.	<0.3	0.3	*	1	0	0	0	0	2	5
Independent Baptist in hist. black trad.	0.5	<0.3	1	1	0	0	0	0	7	4
Other Baptist (incl. "just Baptist")	4.1	3.8	8	8	6	6	4	4	26	27
<b>Nondenominational</b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>6.2</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>
Nondenominational evangelical	1.2	2.0	2	4	4	8	0	0	0	0
Nondenominational charismatic	0.5	0.6	1	1	2	2	0	0	0	0
Interdenominational in evangelical trad.	0.5	0.6	1	1	2	2	0	0	0	0
Nondenominational fundamentalist	0.3	0.3	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
Interdenominational in mainline trad.	0.3	0.3	1	1	0	0	1	2	0	0
Other nondenominational	1.8	2.5	4	5	4	6	3	5	3	5
<b>Methodist</b>	<b>6.2</b>	<b>4.6</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>
United Methodist Church	5.1	3.6	10	8	0	0	28	25	0	0
African Methodist Episcopal	0.4	0.3	1	1	0	0	0	0	6	5
Other Methodist (incl. "just Methodist")	0.8	0.7	1	1	1	1	2	2	3	3
<b>Pentecostal</b>	<b>4.4</b>	<b>4.6</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>16</b>
Assemblies of God	1.4	1.4	3	3	5	5	0	0	0	0
Church of God in Christ	0.6	0.6	1	1	0	0	0	0	8	9
Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.)	0.4	0.4	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
Other Pentecostal	2.0	2.3	4	5	6	7	0	0	5	7
<b>Lutheran</b>	<b>4.6</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	2.0	1.4	4	3	0	0	11	9	0	0
Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod	1.4	1.1	3	2	5	4	0	0	0	0
Other Lutheran (incl. "just Lutheran")	1.3	1.1	2	2	2	2	5	5	0	0

TABLE CONTINUES ON NEXT PAGE...

2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014. Figures may not add to 100% and nested figures may not add to subtotals indicated due to rounding.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

**Figure 2.1**<sup>50</sup>

**Large Denominations and Protestant Religious Traditions (continued...)**

	Among total population		Among all Protestants		Among evangelical tradition		Among mainline tradition		Among historically black Prot. tradition	
	2007	2014	2007	2014	2007	2014	2007	2014	2007	2014
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Presbyterian</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	1.1	0.9	2	2	0	0	6	6	0	0
Presbyterian Church in America	0.4	0.4	1	1	2	2	0	0	0	0
Other Presbyterian	1.1	0.9	2	2	1	1	4	4	0	0
<b>Restorationist</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
Church of Christ	1.5	1.5	3	3	6	6	0	0	0	0
Disciples of Christ	0.3	<0.3	1	*	0	0	2	1	0	0
Other Restorationist	<0.3	<0.3	*	*	1	1	*	*	0	0
<b>Episcopalian/Anglican</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
Episcopal Church	1.0	0.9	2	2	0	0	6	6	0	0
Anglican	0.3	<0.3	1	1	0	0	2	2	0	0
Other Episcopalian/Anglican	<0.3	<0.3	*	*	*	*	1	1	0	0
<b>Holiness</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
Church of the Nazarene	0.3	0.3	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
Free Methodist	0.3	<0.3	1	*	1	1	0	0	0	0
Other Holiness	0.6	0.4	1	1	2	1	0	0	2	1
<b>Congregationalist</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>0.6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
United Church of Christ	0.5	0.4	1	1	0	0	3	3	0	0
Other Congregationalist	<0.3	<0.3	*	*	*	*	1	1	0	0
<b>Adventist</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>0.6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
Seventh-day Adventist	0.4	0.5	1	1	2	2	0	0	0	0
Other Adventist	<0.3	<0.3	*	*	*	*	0	0	0	0
<b>Anabaptist</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>	<b>0.3</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Reformed</b>	<b>0.3</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Pietist</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Friends</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Other evangelical/fundamentalist</b>	<b>0.3</b>	<b>0.3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Protestant non-specific</b>	<b>4.9</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>
	<b>=51.3</b>	<b>=46.5</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014. Figures may not add to 100% and nested figures may not add to subtotals indicated due to rounding.

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Since this thesis will rely heavily on the findings of the Pew Research Center's RLS as an outline and reference in future chapters, it is important to acknowledge any faults or shortcomings of the study. One major fault of the RLS is the method of classification it used to compile the historically black Protestant tradition. This thesis focuses on the mainline and evangelical Protestant traditions. The RLS, however, includes three traditions in its report – the third being the historically black tradition. In the RLS, respondents were grouped into the three Protestant traditions based on the specific denomination with which they identified. This task, however, became more complicated when respondents were unsure of which denomination their congregations belonged. According to the study,

Protestant respondents who gave a vague answer to denominational questions (e.g. 'I am just a Baptist' or 'I know I'm a Methodist but don't know which specific Methodist denomination I belong to') were placed into one of the three Protestant traditions based on their race and/or their response to a question that asked if they would describe themselves as a 'born-again or evangelical Christian.'<sup>51</sup>

Unfortunately, this solution proved problematic because of the disproportional amount of African Americans placed under the Historically Black tradition simply because of their race rather than their specific congregation's historical ties to that tradition. The survey states that 53% of the historically black Protestant tradition gave a vague denominational identity, which means that over half of the tradition's adherence was assigned simply due to a person's race. This is not to say that the problem of vague denominational identity did not cause issue for the other two Protestant traditions, 36% of the evangelical tradition and 35% of the mainline tradition were also unsure of which denomination their



specific congregations belonged. However, due to the substantially higher level of vagueness and uncertainty in the historically black tradition this thesis will not include this tradition in its analysis. Undoubtedly, other limitations of the RLS exist. The majority of these limitations, however, are universally found across survey research instead of being specific to this report. This thesis will not go into detail about the universal limitations of survey research. Universal survey issues such as varying margins of error and phrasing limitations, however, should be kept in mind.<sup>52</sup>

## **CHAPTER 3 – The Mainline Protestant Tradition**

### Introduction

This chapter will introduce the mainline Protestant tradition as well as describe its status and exhibited trend within America's religious economy. The first section of this chapter will describe general characteristics and distinguishing attributes of the mainline tradition. The next section of this chapter will be dedicated to outlining the trends of growth and decline within the mainline tradition. These trends have been extracted from reports published by the Pew Research Center about the findings of the 2007 and 2014 RLSs. The final section of this chapter applies the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory, which was introduced in Chapter 2, to the information presented about the mainline tradition in this chapter. First, this chapter will loosely situate the mainline tradition within the graphs of the bell curve theory. Then, two theoretical implications of the mainline tradition's placement within the graphs will be described and compared to the RLS survey data. As a whole, this chapter will demonstrate the effectiveness of the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory's focus on the relationship between a religious organization's degree of tension with society and their congregational attendance in helping to predict and explain the status and trends of the mainline tradition within America's religious economy.

### What is the Mainline Protestant Tradition?

The mainline Protestant tradition is comprised of a group of Protestant denominations that share similar attributes. These attributes include shared practices,

beliefs, or histories. Some of the denominations categorized under the mainline tradition include: United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Although the tradition contains denominations that share certain attributes, the group remains diverse because different denominations fulfill either more or possibly less of the dominant mainline characteristics. For this reason, statements about the entire tradition should be understood as generalizations of the entire mainline tradition instead of direct statements about each and every mainline denomination. With that said, the mainline tradition can be generally defined by three dominant attributes. These three attributes are; being liberal in nature, ecumenically minded, and focused on social activism.<sup>53</sup> The three attributes of the tradition will be expanded upon in this section and used in a later section as indicators to place the overall tradition within the graphs of the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory.

A popular way to conceptualize the two dominant traditions of Protestantism is to associate each tradition with either liberalism or conservatism. This dichotomy within Protestantism can be interpreted politically as well as theologically. The mainline tradition is typically associated with political and theological liberalism.<sup>54</sup> On the political side of this dichotomist perspective, it is typically assumed that all of mainline Protestants' political beliefs and stances align with liberalism. In practice, however, mainline Protestants tend to hold liberal or progressive stances on social issues and more moderate stances on other policy issues. Over the tradition's history, mainline denominations and congregations have lead the way on many contentious social issues such as women's ordination, civil rights, and the inclusion of gays and lesbians in the church.<sup>55</sup> In recent years, survey data released by the Pew Research Center has found that

the trend of social liberalism has continued with large portions of mainline Protestants tending to take progressive stances on contentious societal issues.<sup>56</sup> Although the mainline Protestant tradition has a significant history and continued association with socially liberal stances on political issues, the theological liberalism of the tradition ultimately holds more weight as a defining attribute of the tradition. This is largely due to the fact that social liberalism steams from the mainline tradition's theological liberalism. A prominent source of mainline theological liberalism is the tradition's assertion that redemption and salvation is available to everyone. Starting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, mainline denominations called into question the Protestant doctrine of depravity and original sin.<sup>57</sup> Some denominations also questioned the notion of hell, arguing that a gracious and benevolent God would never consign one of His children to damnation.<sup>58</sup> These theological issues remain points of contention between mainline and evangelical Protestants today. Often in mainline denominations these doctrines of original sin and damnation are taught as less significant or completely replaced with the doctrine of universal salvation, where the mercy and love of God essentially enables all souls to ultimately be saved. Another element of the mainline tradition's theological liberalism is its common nonliteral interpretations of the Bible. According to a second report on the findings of the 2014 RLS by the Pew Research Center, 35% of mainline Protestants believe that the Bible is the Word of God but not everything should be taken literally. This belief is opposed to the 55% of evangelical Protestants who believe that the Bible is the Word of God and everything should be taken literally.<sup>59</sup> Many mainline denominations encourage the reinterpretation of certain sections of the Bible so that teachings can be adapted to the modern circumstances of contemporary believes. These

widespread beliefs and practices of the mainline tradition show its strong tendency toward theological liberalism, and the social liberalism that follows.

The second major attribute of the mainline Protestant tradition is its ecumenical mindedness. Being ecumenically minded means that the mainline tradition has a strong focus on uniting congregations and denominations. A significant number of the major mainline denominations are members of an organization called, Churches Uniting in Christ. The central motivation of this organization is to, “create unity among Christians”.<sup>60</sup> Also, a significant number of the major mainline denominations are products of merging, and they regard this action as inherently significant to their organizations. The United Methodist Church, which is the largest mainline denomination in the United States, for example, describes itself as a connectional system that enables the group to carry out its mission of unity and strength.<sup>61</sup> The existence of an overarching organization to connect the mainline denominations, and the numerous examples of mainline congregations and denominations choosing to merge together, clearly demonstrates the dominant urge within the overall mainline tradition to consolidate and find unity between each other. This desire for unity is most likely driven by the ideology that there is greater strength, power, and security in numbers. However, it is important to consider how the strong uniting and assimilation tendencies that exist within the mainline tradition sacrifice its ability to diversify and satisfy specific niche religious demands.

The final major attribute of the mainline denomination is its focus on social justice issues. This focus was somewhat touched upon in the explanation of the mainline tradition’s generally progressive stances on social issues. As mentioned earlier, the mainline denominations and congregations have been champions of the progressive

social issues of their day. In today's society for example, the majority of mainline Protestants believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases, the majority believe that environmental regulations are worth the cost, and the majority believe homosexuality should be accepted by society.<sup>62</sup> An important distinction between the evangelical and mainline Protestant traditions regarding social justice is that social concern on the part of evangelicals tends to take the form of an individual or likeminded small group decision, while social concern in mainline denominations tends to be universal across the entire denomination and in some cases the entire tradition.<sup>63</sup> In many ways, social justice has become a tool for the mainline tradition to reassert itself as a centerpiece of society.

#### Trends of Growth and Decline within Mainline Protestantism

A report by the Pew Research Center, that described survey data from the 2014 RLS, explicitly states that the mainline Protestant tradition is one of the main drivers for the drop in the Christian share of the U.S. adult population since 2007. The mainline tradition's market share of U.S. adults has shrunk by 3.4% since 2007. The tradition's share of the Protestant population has also declined. Today, 32% of Protestants identify with denomination in the mainline tradition, which is down from 35% in 2007.

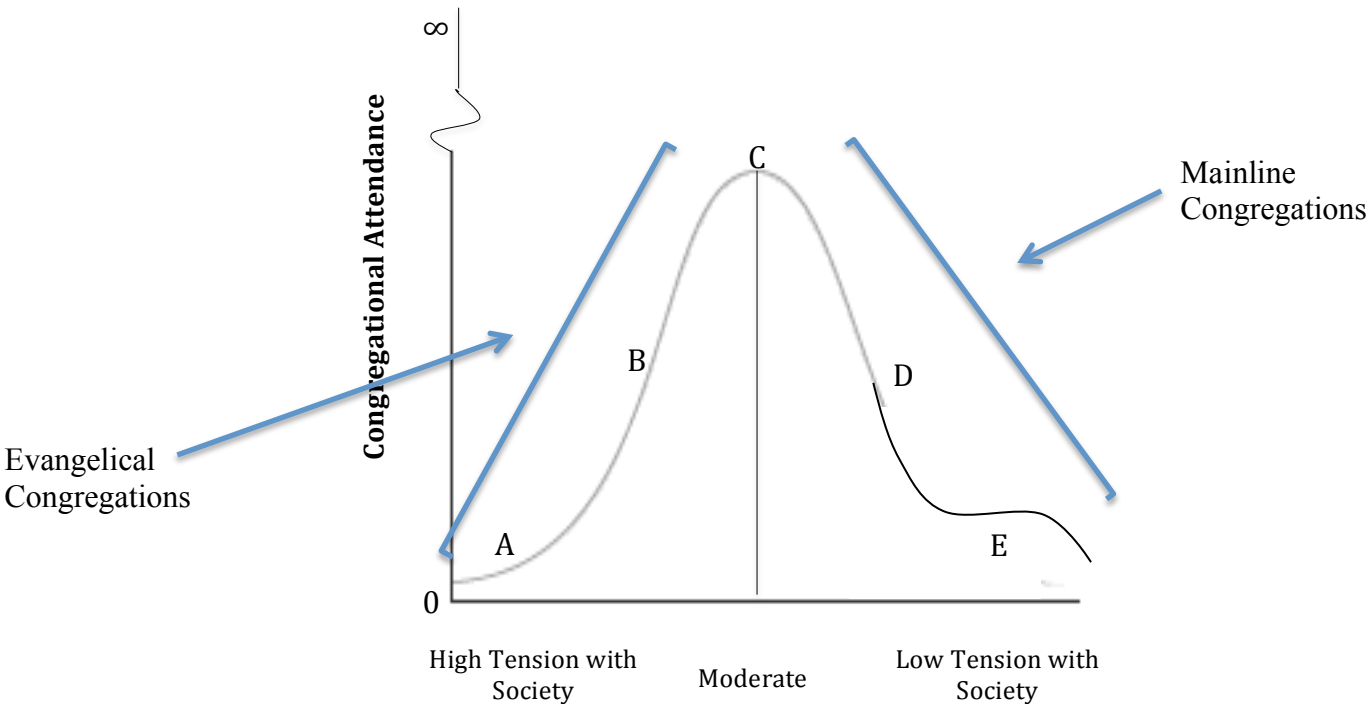
Coincidentally, as seen in Figure 2.0 and 2.1, the majority of prominent mainline denominations have also experienced decline or stagnation in their market shares of U.S. adults and adult Protestants. For instance the United Methodist Church has lost 1.5% amount U.S. adults and lost 2% among Protestant adults, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has lost 0.6% among U.S. adults and lost 1% among Protestant adults,

and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) has lost 0.2% among U.S. adults and 0% among Protestant adults.

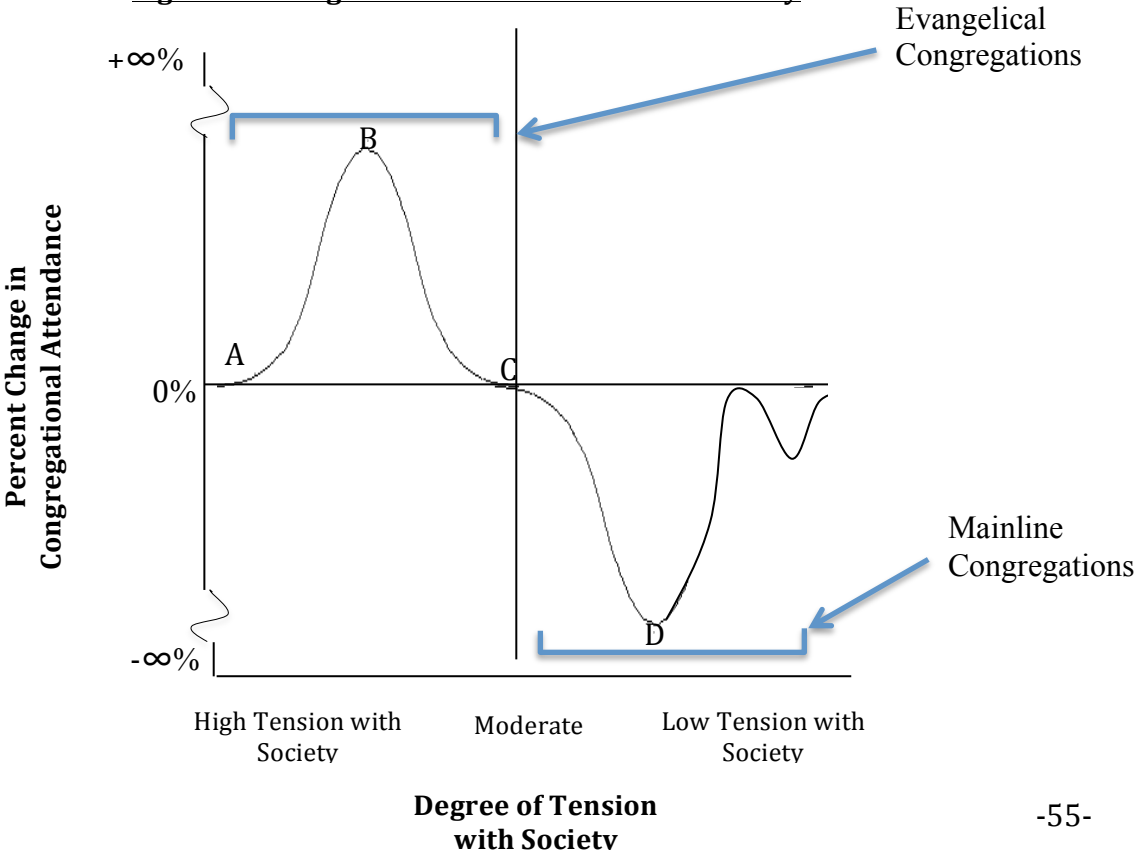
Understanding patterns of religious switching is integral to making sense of the trends observed in American religion over recent years. In the context of American Protestantism, understanding patterns of religious switching can help explain the differing trends of growth and decline between traditions. If Protestantism were treated as a single religious group in the 2014 RLS, 34% of American adults would have had a different religious identity from the one in which they were raised – which is up six percentage points since 2007. When the Protestant traditions are analyzed in separate categories, however, the share of Americans who have switched religions rises to 42%. This statistic demonstrates that religious switching is prominent within the overall Protestant tradition and that it is becoming a more common practice. Unfortunately for the mainline Protestant tradition, it has lost more members to religious switching than it has gained. At the time of the 2014 RLS, 6.1% of American adults identified with mainline Protestantism after having been raised in another faith, which does not overcome the 10.4% loss of American adults who were previously mainline Protestants.<sup>64</sup>

Applying the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory to the Mainline Tradition

**Figure 3.0 Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory**



**Figure 3.1 Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory**





As the reader may have noticed, there have been slight modifications made to Figure 1.0 and Figure 1.1 in this chapter to transform them into Figure 3.0 and Figure 3.1. These modifications were made because the new graphs more accurately reflect the data presented in the Pew Research RLS reports. Instead of steadily reducing to zero congregational attendance between point C and E, the curve in Figure 3.0 now plateaus before dropping to zero. The modifications in Figure 3.0 are reflected in Figure 3.1 because it is the first derivative of Figure 3.0. Therefore, Figure 3.1 demonstrates the new rates of change found in Figure 3.0. These modifications better reflect the RLS survey data because they capture the point at which religious organizations have a low degree of tension with society and a stagnant congregational attendance.

With an understanding of the general attributes that describe the tradition, mainline Protestantism can be loosely plotted along the curves of Figure 3.0 and Figure 3.1 in the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory. The process of applying this theory to the mainline tradition will test the validity of this theory's claims and give some possible explanation from the mainline tradition's substantial declines in adherence. It is important to keep in mind that, similar to the previously described attributes of mainline Protestantism, the mainline tradition's situation within the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory's graphs is an approximation of the entire tradition rather than a direct comment on each and every denomination within the tradition. As described earlier, the mainline tradition is comprised of a variety of diverse denomination and no one description will do justice to every element. In the context of this theory, however, the denominations of the mainline tradition are best described as having a moderate to low degree of tension with society. The mainline denominations' degree of tension with

society tends to be on the lower end of the scale because the practices, teachings, and central beliefs of the tradition tend to be closely aligned or compatible with dominant culture in America. For instance, common doctrines of the mainline tradition such as the inherent goodness of all people and a distinct separation of the sacred and the profane allow the tradition to blend in with the rest of American society. Without doubt, in some regions of the United States the mainline tradition will be less inline with the dominantly held opinions of the community. In the context of the entire American society, however, the central doctrines of the mainline tradition exist smoothly inline with dominant opinion.

The mainline tradition's commonly low degree of tension with society situates it in between points C and E on Figure 3.0 and 3.1. Being situated between these points comes with a number of theoretical implications for the mainline tradition. Firstly, shown by Figure 3.0, there should be an overarching trend of declining congregational attendance within the mainline tradition. As outlined in the previous section, this theoretical implication is supported by the survey data of the Pew Research Center's RLS. The overall market share of the mainline tradition among U.S. adults as well as among Protestant adults is declining. Additionally, the majority of mainline denominations are either experiencing declines or stagnation in their market shares among U.S. adults as well as among Protestant adults.

Although the trend of decline in congregational attendance is fairly constant across the mainline tradition, rate of decline may vary between different mainline denominations. The varying rates of decline by different mainline denominations are addressed by the second theoretical implication of the mainline tradition being situated

between points C and E. Figure 3.1 demonstrates this second implication, which is that a mainline religious organization's percent change in congregational attendance will be negative, and initially drop drastically as the organization begins to move away a moderate degree of tension and towards a low degree of tension with society. As the organization continues to move toward an extremely low degree of tension with society, however, its percent change in congregational attendance will level back to zero. This theoretical implication is upheld by the survey data of the Pew Research Center's RLS. Over recent years, the mainline tradition's percent change has been negative. Certain denominations, however, have had more negative, less negative, and stagnant percent changes compared to the overall tradition. This simply means that each mainline denomination is situated at a slightly different position between points C and E on Figure 3.1. For example, as seen on Figure 2.0, the United Methodist Church denomination's percent change is negative 20% after its market share among the Protestant population went from 10% in 2007 to 8% in 2014. While, also seen on Figure 2.0, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) denomination's percent change is zero after it had no change to its market share among the Protestant population. These two mainline denominations have different percent changes because they have different degrees of tension with society, which situates them at different points along Figure 3.1's curve. Both of these denominations, however, still remain between points C and E on that curve. The United Methodist Church denomination has experienced a dramatic drop in its percent change in congregational attendance because it has a moderately low degree of tension with society, which places it closer to point D on Figure 3.1. On the other hand, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) denomination has experienced stagnation or zero percent change in

congregation attendance because it has an extremely low degree of tension with society, which places it closer to point E on Figure 3.1. The different degrees of tension these two mainline denominations have with society can be demonstrated by RLS survey data. For instances, 65% of the respondents who identified with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) denomination believed that most or all cases of abortion should be legal, while 58% of the respondents who identified with the United Methodist Church denomination believed that abortion should be legal in most or all cases. Also, 65% of Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) respondents believed that homosexuality should be accepted by society, while 60% of United Methodist Church respondents believed that homosexuality should be accepted by society. The differing percentages in opinion demonstrate how the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) denomination aligns more closely with the opinion of dominant culture while the United Methodist Church denomination is slightly less aligned with these dominant opinions. This difference determines the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) denomination's extremely low tension with society as well as its zero percent change in congregational attendance and the United Methodist Church denomination's moderately low tension with society as well as its drastically negative percent change in congregational attendance.

## **CHAPTER 4 – The Evangelical Protestant Tradition**

### Introduction

This chapter will introduce the evangelical Protestant tradition as well as describe its status and exhibited trends within America's religious economy. The first section of this chapter will describe general characteristics and distinguishing attributes of the evangelical tradition. Then the nondenominational movement within the evangelical tradition will be separately explained due to its increasing significance and impact on the entire tradition. The next section of this chapter will be dedicated to analyzing the trends of growth and decline within the evangelical Protestant tradition. These trends were extracted from reports published by the Pew Research Center about the findings of the 2007 and 2014 RLSs. The final section of this chapter applies the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory, which was introduced in Chapter 2, to the information presented about the evangelical tradition in this chapter. First, this final section will loosely plot the evangelical tradition within the graphs of the theory. Then, the theoretical implications of the evangelical tradition's placement within those graphs will be described and ultimately compared to the findings of the RLS survey data. In total, this chapter will demonstrate the effectiveness of the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory's focus on the relationship between a religious organization's degree of tension with society and their congregational attendance in helping predict and explain the status and trends of the evangelical tradition within America's religious economy.

### What is the Evangelical Protestant Tradition?

Like the mainline Protestant tradition, the evangelical Protestant tradition is comprised of a group of denominations that share similar attributes. Some of these denominations include: Southern Baptist Convention, Assemblies of God, and Church of Christ. Also similar to the mainline tradition, the evangelical tradition includes a multitude of diverse denominations. Therefore, statements about the entire tradition should be understood as generalizations instead of direct statements about every evangelical denomination. With that said, the evangelical tradition can be loosely defined as being conservative in nature, pluralistically minded, and focused on personal piety. In similar fashion to Chapter 3, these three attributes will be expanded upon in this section and used in a later section as indicators to place the overall tradition along the curves of Figure 3.0 and Figure 3.1 in the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory.

The most common way of interpreting the evangelical tradition is to see it as the conservative wing of Protestantism.<sup>65</sup> The evangelical tradition's association with conservatism can be interpreted in two different ways – politically or theologically. In the political interpretation, studies have found that a substantial majority of self-identifying Republicans also belong to the evangelical tradition (Pew Research new report). It has also been found the evangelical tradition as a whole has been extensively involved in American electoral politics.<sup>66</sup> On moral and social issues, evangelicals tend to take a more traditionalist stance and also desire the reflection of biblical ethics in American laws. On domestic and foreign issues, evangelicals tend to support candidates who advocate for free economic markets and strong national defense.<sup>67</sup> Although there is a definite correlation between the evangelical tradition and political conservatism, the

theological interpretation of the evangelical conservatism ultimately holds more merit as a defining attribute of the tradition. This is because the theological content of a religious organization is inherently more important than the coincidental alignment of ideas with a political party. A major source of theological conservatism within the evangelical tradition is the commonly held belief in the divine and completely infallible nature of the bible. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the majority of the evangelical tradition employs a literal interpretation of the Bible. This practice is considered theologically conservative because evangelicals resist the contemporary tendency to adapt the Bible's teachings to modern circumstances. Evangelicals firmly believe that since the Bible is God's word, it should remain unchanged and the core of Christian life.<sup>68</sup> Also, the centrality of doctrines such as the virgin birth of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, and Jesus' imminent second coming also attribute to the traditions conservatism.<sup>69</sup> Finally, maintaining firm belief in original sin and damnation while the mainline tradition softened its beliefs on these teachings also indicates the often profound theological conservatism of the of evangelical tradition.

The evangelical traditions can also be characterized as being pluralistically minded. Opposed to the mainline tradition's urge to unite its denominations and congregations, the evangelical traditions looks to diversify its denominations and congregations. These distinct attributes of the two Protestant traditions can even be observed within the local Claremont area. The sheer number of local evangelical congregations compared to local mainline congregations is striking. As an estimate, there are over 30 evangelical congregations in the local area while there are only a handful of mainline congregations. The greater number of evangelical congregations can be largely

attributed to the evangelical tradition's more open acceptance of niche denominations. The less defined boundaries of the evangelical tradition allow it to encompass these niche denominations and congregations. This causes the evangelical tradition to have more denominations that include a lower percentage of their adherents, while the mainline tradition has fewer denominations that include a higher percentage of their adherents. Even though individual evangelical congregations often have smaller attendances than mainline congregations, the greater number of evangelical congregations that satisfy niche religious demands enable the evangelical tradition to attract higher adherences as a whole.

Finally, a central focus of evangelical Protestantism is personal piety. This focus can be defined as the cultivation of godly zeal and behavior through personal practice of devotion.<sup>70</sup> The evangelical tradition's focus on personal piety is manifested in the common practice of genuine religiosity in affairs not typically considered sacred or religious.<sup>71</sup> For evangelicals, faith is not exclusive to one aspect of their lives. They firmly believe that the central teachings of their faith should transcend the walls of their congregation. It is not adequate to simply go through the motions of church attendance and then revert back to societal life. Evangelicals believe that an adherent must live an earnest moral life that sets a believer apart from the rest of society.<sup>72</sup> Another way to understand the evangelical tradition's focus of personal piety is to contrast it with Durkheim's notion of the sacred and the profane. While mainline Protestants adhere to teachings that distinguish sacred places or affairs from profane places or affairs, evangelical Protestant refuse to relegate religion to a particular sphere of life.<sup>73</sup> They feel that the segmentation of religion into a churchly realm, and other areas of life into a



secular realm, denies the importance of faith in all aspects of life.<sup>74</sup> In total, the evangelicalism's focus on personal piety is reflected in an adherent's desire have religiosity in all aspects of their lives by personally demonstrating their faith outside of the church with great zeal.

### Nondenominationalism

Nondenominationalism is an increasing prominent movement that is taking place within the evangelical Protestant tradition of the United States. In this movement, individual congregations are choosing to become autonomous organizations. This means that the congregation is completely disassociated from any denominational group. Although nondenominational congregations are not associated with a specific evangelical denomination, they still belong within the evangelical tradition. This is because the evangelical tradition best encompasses general nondenominational characteristics, especially their pluralistic tendencies. There are a number of reasons why a congregation may choose to become nondenominational. Firstly, nondenominational congregations are not tied to a larger organization or authority. They are free to teach, practice, and believe whatever they feel best fulfills their objectives. Some nondenominational congregations claim that denominations become too focused on “nonessentials”.<sup>75</sup> Nonessentials are distinguishing beliefs or characteristics of particular denominations that are not essential to the observance of the central faith. Being nondenominational allows congregations to move away from these nonessentials and reassert their focus on the core theology of Protestantism. Another reason why congregations choose to become nondenominational is that they remain free of stigmas associated with denominations. Unfortunately,

denominations often carry stigmas about what they believe or how they practice. Regardless of the truth behind these stigmas, they may discourage religious consumers from joining a particular congregation. Nondenominational congregations, however, escape these stigmas thanks to their autonomous nature. Finally, nondenominational congregations have greater freedom to adapt and suit the demands of the community in which the congregation exists. Since they are not obligated to follow the requirements of a large organization, nondenominational congregations are freer to emphasize the aspects of their theology that best resonate with their surrounding community. Ultimately, this freedom allows nondenominational congregations to better fulfill the niche religious demands of specific communities.

All of these possible benefits of being nondenominational, however, are not to imply that these congregations do not face challenges. One of the largest challenges nondenominational congregations face is acquiring adequate funding to maintain their organizations. Without the support of nationwide denomination it is difficult for nondenominational congregations, which generally have relatively small memberships, to financially support themselves. Nondenominational congregations can often also lack access to resources that religious consumers seek in religious organizations.

#### Trends of Growth and Decline within Evangelical Protestantism

While the overall Protestant share of the population has dropped in recent years, the evangelical tradition's market share has remained more stable. In the 2014 RLS, 25% of the United States adult population identified with Protestant evangelical denominations, which is down less than one percentage point since the 2007 RLS. Within

the overall Protestant tradition, however, the evangelical tradition has made significant gains in their market share. In the 2014 RLS, the evangelical tradition constituted a clear majority of the Protestant population with its share having risen from 51% in 2007 to 55% in 2014. This growth trend, however, has not been consistent across the entire evangelical tradition. As seen in Figure 2.0 and 2.1, some denominations within the tradition have been facing declining growth trends, while others' growth trends are exponentially increasing. For example, the Southern Baptist Convention, which is the largest evangelical denomination, has experience significant declines in their market share of all U.S. adults as well as the Protestant population. Among all U.S. adults, 5.3% identified with the Southern Baptist Convention in the 2014 RLS, which is down for 6.7% in 2007. Among Protestants, 11% identified with the denomination in 2014, which is down form 13% in 2007. On the other hand, the nondenominational evangelical denomination has experienced significant growth in their market shares. Among all U.S. adults, 2% identified as nondenominational in the 2014 RLS, which is up from 1.2% in 2007. Among the Protestant population, 4% identified as nondenominational in 2014, which has double from 2% in 2007. Although the nondenominational evangelical denomination constitutes a relatively small portion of the U.S. adult population and even the overall Protestant population, its rates of growth remain of significant interest because they are much greater than any other Protestant denomination.

Shifting market shares within the Protestant tradition is at least partially due to religious switching. As described earlier, religious switching has been proven prominent throughout the religious landscape of the United States, and especially within the Protestant tradition. Opposed to the mainline Protestant tradition's losses due to religious

switching, the evangelical Protestant tradition has made significant gains. Overall, 23.9% of U.S. adults were raised as evangelical Protestants. Of those U.S. adults, 8.4% of them no longer identify with evangelicalism. But, 9.8% of American adults now identify with the evangelical Protestant tradition after being raised outside the tradition. This gives evangelical Protestantism a positive ratio in religious switching of approximately 1.2 people joining the tradition for every one person who leaves. Religious switching is also prominent within the evangelical Protestant tradition. For example, 19.2% of American adults were raised Baptist, which is a predominantly evangelical denominational family. 8.4% of those adults are no longer Baptist while only 4.5% of all adults identify as Baptist after having been raised in a different faith. This means that Baptist lose approximately two people for every one person that joins the denominational family. By contrast, the nondenominational evangelical denomination gains more adherents through religious switching than it loses. Just 2% of U.S. adults were raised as nondenominational evangelicals, and 1.1% of them no longer identify with the denomination. But, 5.3% of American adults now identify as nondenominational evangelical protestant after having been raised in another faith or in no faith. This means that nondenominational evangelicalism gains approximately five people for every one person it loses through religious switching.<sup>76</sup>

#### Applying the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory to the Evangelical Tradition

As described earlier, the evangelical tradition is composed of a multitude of diverse denominations and evaluations of the entire tradition should be understood generally instead of specifically to each denomination within the tradition. Continuing

with this understanding, the evangelical tradition can be loosely plotted along the curves of Figure 3.0 and Figure 3.1 in the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory. In the context of this theory, the denominations of the evangelical tradition are best described as having a high to moderate degree of tension with society. The evangelical denominations' degree of tension with society tends to be on the higher end of the scale because the practices, teachings, and central beliefs of the tradition tend to question and conflict with dominant culture in American society. For instance, common doctrines of the evangelical tradition such as original sin, traditional marriage, and the imminent second coming of Jesus set the tradition apart from the rest of American society. Of course, in some regions of the United States, the common doctrines of the evangelical tradition are less removed from the dominantly held opinions of the local community. When considering the entire American society, however, many central doctrines of the evangelical tradition are in contention with commonly held opinion.

The evangelical tradition's generally high degree of tension with society places it between points A and C on Figure 3.0 and Figure 3.1. Being placed between these points comes with a number of theoretical implications for the evangelical tradition. Firstly, as shown by Figure 3.0, there should be an overarching trend of congregational attendance increasing within the evangelical tradition. This theoretical implication is somewhat supported by the survey data of Pew Research Center's RLS. As stated in the previous section, the entire evangelical tradition's market share among the American adult population has remained relatively steady over recent years. The evangelical tradition's market share among the Protestant adult population, however, has made large gains in recent years. Although, these gains in market share and congregational attendance were

still not consistent across all of the evangelical denominations. Though arguably, the evangelical denominations that have degrees of tension with society between points A and C on Figure 3.0 were reported as having the largest increases in market share within evangelical Protestantism. For example, Assemblies of God and Nondenominational evangelical are both denominations under the evangelical tradition. The Assemblies of God denomination has experienced relative stagnation in their market share of U.S. adults, while the Nondenominational evangelical denomination is experiencing significant growth.<sup>77</sup> According to a second report published on the findings of the 2014 RLS, 66% of respondents who identified with the Assemblies denomination believed that homosexuality should be discouraged by society. According to the same report, 59% of respondents who identified with the Nondenominational evangelical denomination believed that homosexuality should be discouraged by society.<sup>78</sup> The higher percentage of Assemblies of God respondents that believe homosexuality should be discouraged by society causes the denomination to have higher degree of tension with dominant culture than the Nondenominational evangelical denomination. Consequently, this higher degree of tension with society held by the Assemblies of God denomination places it further left on Figure 3.0's curve than the Nondenominational evangelical denomination. As demonstrated by Figure 3.0, this more leftward placement between points A and C predicts the Assemblies of God denomination's congregational attendance numbers to be lower than the Nondenominational evangelical denomination's congregational attendance numbers, which is reflected in the survey data of the 2014 RLS. This is not to say that each of these denominations' position on homosexuality is the sole determinant of their relative congregational attendance stagnation or growth. This social position is simply

used as an example to demonstrate how specific evangelical denomination's commonly held positions determines the degree of tension they hold with society which in turn affects their congregational attendance.

Figure 3.1 shows the second theoretical implication of the evangelical tradition being placed between points A and C. This theoretical implication is that an evangelical religious organization's percent change in congregational attendance should remain positive and initially spike as the organization begins to move towards a moderate degree of tension with society but then level back to zero as it approaches that moderate degree of tension with society. This theoretical implication is also somewhat upheld by the survey data of the Pew Research Center's RLS. Over recent years, the evangelical tradition's percent change in congregational attendance has been slightly negative, but essentially zero, with a less than one percent drop in market share. Certain denominations within the evangelical tradition, however, have experienced exponential growth in their percent change in congregational attendance. For example, as seen on Figure 2.0, the Nondenominational evangelical denomination's percent change in congregational attendance is 100% after its market share among the Protestant population went from 2% in 2007 to 4% in 2014. On the other hand, the Assemblies of God denomination's percent change in congregational attendance, which can also be seen on Figure 2.0, has remained at zero from 2007 to 2014. These two examples demonstrate how different evangelical denominations can be placed at different points along Figure 3.1's curve but their percent changes in congregational attendance remain positive and between points A and C. Some evangelical denominations, however, have experienced a negative percent change in congregational attendance over recent years. For instance, as seen in Figure 2.0, the

Southern Baptist Convention denomination has experienced a negative 15.4% change in market share among all Protestants from 2007 to 2014. It can be argued, however, that outliers such as the Southern Baptist Convention denomination do not reflect the same high to moderate degree of tension with society that other evangelical denominations with a positive percent increases in congregational attendance reflect. A good indicator of the Southern Baptist Convention denomination's lessened degree of tension with society is their beliefs on human evolution. According to the second report on the 2014 RLS findings, 12% of respondents who identified with the Southern Baptist Convention denomination believed that humans evolved due to natural processes.<sup>79</sup> This view of human evolution is more closely aligned to the opinion of dominant culture in America than the evangelical tradition's commonly held view that humans have always existed in their present form. The percentage of Southern Baptist Convention respondents who believed in natural evolution is relatively high compared to other evangelical denominations. For instance, only 7% of Assemblies of God respondents and 4% of Nondenominational evangelical respondents believed that humans evolved due to natural processes.<sup>80</sup> Although the percentage of Southern Baptist Convention respondents is relatively small when considered outside of the evangelical tradition, it still lessens the degree of tension the denomination has with society – which potentially helps explain its negative percent change in congregational attendance over recent years.



## **CHAPTER 5 – Religious Change in the Local Claremont Area**

### Introduction

The final chapter of this thesis will consider the religious change that has occurred throughout the Claremont and surrounding local areas. A number of interviews with pastors of local Protestant congregations will be analyzed in order to understand how local congregations have changed over time and how they may or may not feel pressure to adapt to the dominant culture of the area as well as the dominant culture of America. The first section of this chapter will provide general information about the congregations that participated in the interviews. The second section of this chapter will include an analysis of the interviews with local pastors and provide insight into how the findings of the interviews may be seen in light of the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory.

A multitude of congregations from a variety of different denominations were reached out to in the research process for this chapter. The goal was to have one interview from three major mainline denominations and three major evangelical denominations. From the mainline tradition, local congregations belonging to the United Methodist Church denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America denomination, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) denomination were all contacted. From the evangelical tradition, local congregations belonging to the Southern Baptist Convention, the Nondenominational Evangelical denomination, and the Assemblies of God denomination were all contacted. In total, five interviews with local pastors were conducted. Two of these interviews were conducted with nondenominational evangelical congregations. One interview was conducted with an evangelical Assemblies of God

congregation. Another interview was conducted with a mainline Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) congregation. And the final interview was conducted with a mainline United Methodist Church congregation. In these interviews the pastors were asked a series of questions about their congregation's affiliation with a larger denomination, how their congregation meets the needs of its adherents, and how their congregation goes about attracting new members. This chapter, however, will focus on the questions asked about how the congregation's practices, teachings, and central beliefs have changed or been adapted and whether the congregation feels any pressure to adapt to dominant culture in the Claremont area or in the United States.

#### General Information about Local Congregations

Solid Rock Church is a small nondenominational church plant that is located in downtown Claremont. The church is relatively new since it has only held services for the last 19 months. To start their church, Solid Rock received funding from a Southern Baptist association called the North American Mission Board. Besides this funding and a shared general statement of faith, the congregation shares little affiliation with the Southern Baptist Convention denomination of the North American Mission Board. Solid Rock Church claims Jesus Christ to be their senior pastor, but they also have three additional pastors. Ruben Reyes Sr. is the lay pastor for prayer, Ruben Reyes III is the pastor for preaching and vision, and Lou Galvan is the lay pastor for theology. The stated mission of the congregation is, "Solid Rock Church is a Gospel centered family living on mission to participate in the redeeming work of Jesus in our cities". The interview for this thesis was conducted with Pastor Ruben Reyes III.<sup>81</sup>

Tapestry Church is also a small nondenominational church plant based out of Claremont. This church plant also received funding from a Southern Baptist association but shares little affiliation with the denomination. Curt Phillips is the sole pastor at Tapestry Church. Pastor Phillips had come to the congregation relatively recently after their former pastor resigned in January of this year. The congregation describes itself as a family of disciple-makers who love Jesus, one another, and their city. The stated vision of Tapestry Church is, “to reproduce missional communities throughout the Inland Empire, leading to continual growth of the church throughout our area”. The interview for this thesis was conducted with Pastor Curt Phillips.<sup>82</sup>

Living Word Assembly is a fairly large Assemblies of God congregation located in Chino that claims to have more than 500 believers. Victor Ruiz, who has remained the senior pastor of Living Word Assembly to this day, founded the congregation in 1989. The congregation also has three additional pastors for care groups, Spanish ministry, and prayer support. Pastor Victor Ruiz describes the Living Word Assembly as being very closely aligned to the tenets of faith in the Assemblies of God denomination. This is also evident by the fact that the Assemblies of God denomination’s Statement of Fundamental Truths is posed on the Living Word Assembly’s website. The stated mission of this congregation is, “Living World Assembly is committed to encourage and equip people to pursue three vital relationships: (1) intimacy with God, (2) fellowship with each other, and (3) impact with our community and the greater world. The interview for this thesis was conducted with Pastor Victor Ruiz.<sup>83</sup>

Claremont Presbyterian Church (CPC) is a fairly large Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) congregation located in Claremont that claims to have a membership of 650

people. The CPC is about to celebrate its sixtieth year after being founded in 1955.

Reverend Karen Sapio has been the pastor of this congregation since 2006. CPC also has an associate pastor and a parish associate. Reverend Karen Sapio describes CPC as being strongly aligned with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) denomination, even more so now that the denomination has a more progressive stance on gays and lesbians being ordained in the church and same-sex marriage taking place in the context of the church. The mission statement of CPC is, “Claremont Presbyterian Church is called by God to CARE”. CARE is an acronym that stands for creating inspirational and relevant worship services and programs centered in Jesus Christ so a diversity of people can be active in their Christian fellowship; acting with love and hospitality toward those who visit and those on the margins of the community; revitalizing their mission giving by offering their time and talents in volunteer work with local and international mission project, while continuing to support the mission of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A); and educating their children, youth, adults, and those outside their congregation to become faithful followers of Jesus Christ. The interview for this thesis was conducted with Reverend Karen Sapio.<sup>84</sup>

The Claremont United Methodist Church (Claremont UMC) is a fairly large United Methodist Church congregation located in Claremont. Reverend Mark Wiley is the lead pastor of the congregation and Reverend Martha Morales is the associate pastor of the congregation. Reverend Martha Morales has described Claremont UMC’s alignment with the broader United Methodist Church denomination as present in most ways but not always consistent. A unique attribute of the United Methodist Church denomination is that it is part of a worldwide connectional church. Due to this worldwide

connection Reverend Morales stated that, “[the Claremont UMC congregation] doesn’t have the freedom to chose [it’s] own way and decide what [it is] going to do locally”. The mission statement of the Claremont UMC is, “As followers of Jesus Christ, we are an inclusive community responding to God’s love and grace. We nurture one another on our spiritual journeys. We work for peace and justice. We serve other and God’s creation. Together, we seek God’s creative transformation of the world, and of individual hearts.” The interview for this thesis was conducted with Associate Pastor Martha Morales.<sup>85</sup>

#### Analysis of Interviews with Local Pastors

The main section of the interview conducted with the local pastors concentrated on how religious congregations may have changed over time and whether or how change was affected by dominant culture in America. The first question of this section asked the pastors whether, over the history of their involvement with this particular congregation, any practices, teachings, or central beliefs had been changed or adapted. In response to this question, the majority of the pastors answered that while the theology and core beliefs of their congregation had not been subject to change, the practices and the ways in which their congregation operates had changed. Pastor Ruben Reyes from Solid Rock Church, for example, spoke about his congregation’s conscious choice to start saying “Jesus” in place of “God” in order to better suit the dominant culture of the Claremont community. Pastor Reyes described the Claremont culture as being hyper-existential. By this, he likely meant that Claremont’s culture is more closely aligned with a determinist mindset where one’s actions will dictate their future, rather than a pre-determinist mindset where one’s future has already been decided. Using the word Jesus instead of

God would better suit the determinist mindset because Jesus is associated with being an exemplar in living a sinless life, while God is associated with omnipotence. In living a sinless life by the example of Jesus, individuals perceive themselves as taking an active role in determining their future. Saying Jesus instead of God does not change the theology or core beliefs of Solid Rock Church, but it is a significant practical change to the way in which the congregation operates. Reverend Karen Sapio, from the Claremont Presbyterian Church, also spoke about changing her congregation's organization and practice while leaving theology and core beliefs intact. She said that the theology of the Claremont Presbyterian Church has not undergone many significant changes since the founding of the congregation, but she is actively looking for ways the church can adapt to meet the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Curt Phillips of Tapestry Church also made clear that while the dynamics of his congregation may have changed with the recent change in leadership, the mission, vision, and direction of the congregation has not changed.

On the other hand, a couple of the pastors described changes that had affected the congregation's theology as well as its practices and methods of operation. Pastor Victor Ruiz from the Living Word Assembly, for instance, stated that his congregation's practices, teachings, and central beliefs had "absolutely" changed over time. Although Living Word Assembly was the most conservative and least progressive congregation interviewed, Pastor Ruiz emphasized that, "the church has to adapt to culture". An example of a doctrinal change that the Living Word Assembly congregation and other Assemblies of God congregations have undergone is the denomination's stance on divorced people in leadership roles of the church. Previously in the Assemblies of God denomination, if someone had been divorced, they were barred from being a minister of

the church or any other major leadership role. Pastor Ruiz explained that although divorce is still discouraged by the denomination, the reality and frequency of divorce in today's society has caused the denomination and its many congregations to adapt. Another example of a congregation making changes to their doctrine as well as their practice came from the Claremont UMC congregation. The Claremont UMC became a reconciling congregation in 1993. This means that the congregation is now openly accepting of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Associate Pastor Martha Morales described this doctrinal change as an, "important part of the DNA of this congregation".

The next question asked of the local pastors was what they perceived the dominant culture in America to be like today. Interestingly, the majority of the pastors had a similar answer to this broad question. Four out of the five pastors described the dominant culture in America as something along the lines of self-centered or individualistic. Pastor Reyes pithily stated that, "If I had to summarize [the dominating culture of America] it would be solitude". Reverend Sapio observed that dominant culture is oriented around individualism and consumerism. Associate Pastor Morales added that along with American dominant culture's self-centered focus, there is an increasing notion that being greedy or selfish is acceptable. Lastly, Pastor Phillips made the point that churches have picked up on the self-centered tendency of American culture and are adapting their services to appease the people, rather than having their services be about God. On the other hand, Pastor Ruiz described dominant culture as not being consistent across the United States. Pastor Ruiz explained that according to the region of

the United States in which one resides, dominant culture would be very different. He described the dominant culture of California as being very liberal and progressive.

After describing what they perceived dominant culture to be like in America today, the pastors were asked whether they thought that their congregation had any practices, teachings, or central beliefs that conflict with that dominant culture? All five of the pastors felt that their congregations did have practices, teachings, or central beliefs that conflicted with dominant culture in America. The four pastors that described America's dominant culture as being self-centered and individualistic spoke about their congregations being a place of community which already goes against that dominant culture. Reverend Sapio from CPC pointed out that in today's society, gathering together to do something with other people is much more counter-cultural than it used to be.

Associate Pastor Morales from Claremont UMC stated that a large part of her congregation's mission is to counteract the dominant tendency of self-centeredness by focusing on the common good and what is best for all people. Pastor Reyes from Solid Rock Church related the struggle against individualism to the entire Christian faith by stating that, "The life of a Christian is to be in community or in congregation for the sake of each other". Finally, Pastor Ruiz from Living Word Assembly spoke about how his congregation conflicted with his perception of dominant culture in California. Pastor Ruiz said that his congregation conflicted with the liberal, progressive nature of dominant culture in California by standing by its conservative values. For instance, the congregation still believes marriage is between a man and a women, they also believe that abortion as a teaching is against their values. Pastor Ruiz, however, made clear that



the entire population of adherents did not necessarily hold these same general congregational beliefs.

The final question of this section asked the pastors to reflect on the extent to which their congregation has felt pressure to adapt to dominant culture in America. The answers to this question seemed to be split between the two the Protestant traditions. The pastors belonging to mainline congregations – the CPC and the Claremont UMC – felt that there was a definite pressure to adapt to dominant culture and that their congregations were in a constant battle against that pressure. On the other hand, pastors belonging to evangelical congregations – Tapestry Church, Solid Rock Church, and Living Word Assembly Church – felt that there was less pressure to adapt to dominant culture and emphasized the importance of their congregation’s core beliefs remaining intact. Reverend Sapio from CPC, which is considered a mainline congregation, believed that her congregation feels the greatest pressure to adapt to a sense of individualistic consumerism. She explained that in today’s society people tend to come to church expecting to consume religion and like everything they hear. This puts pressure on religious organizations to appease people in order for them to remain in attendance. Reverend Sapio reflected that, “I think it used to be that people would change themselves to fit with their church, but now people aren’t as willing to do that”. Associate Pastor Morales from Claremont UMC, which is also a mainline congregation, spoke about the pressure that her congregation feels to adapt to a more individualistic mindset but also recognized the church as community in which people could find strength to fight against this dominant tendency together. Pastor Morales felt that as a community, the Claremont UMC could resist the pressure to adapt to dominant culture better than individuals could

resist that pressure. Alternatively, the Tapestry Church and Solid Rock Church, which are considered evangelical congregations, did not recognize a pressure to adapt to the dominant culture of America in their congregations. Both of these pastors felt that their congregations' teachings directly oppose the self-centered tendency of American culture and therefore could not be adapted to appease that tendency. Pastor Phillips felt that when religious organizations try to appease dominant culture, they end up "gutting the Bible from all of its power". Pastor Ruiz from Living Word Assembly, which is also an evangelical congregation, recognized that although there might be pressure to adapt to dominant culture, his congregation utilizes that pressure to find ways to adapt to that culture without changing their core beliefs. He used an analogy to further explain the distinction, "The packaging can change but the content in that packaging cannot change".

Pastor Ruiz's final point emphasizes an essential difference between the mainline and evangelical traditions. This difference also helps determine the general placement of the two traditions within the graphs of the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory. As a whole, evangelical congregations better embody the idea of changing the packaging of a product without changing its content. While evangelicals do change the packaging of their product by adapting to the demands of today's society, they emphasize the importance of keeping intact their core beliefs, which ultimately sustains their degree of tension with society. On the contrary, mainline congregations tend to change the packaging of their product as well as the content in order to stay attuned to the demands of today's society. Ultimately, this decreases their degree of tension with society. In total, the way in which a religious organization adapts to the demands of today's religious

consumers determines the degree of tension they maintain with society and the affects that tension will have on their congregational attendance.<sup>86</sup>

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In the introductory chapter, this thesis promised to challenge Durkheim's notion of a distinct and logical separation of the sacred and the profane. It was stated that, throughout this thesis, the sacred and the profane would be directly connected and contiguity would be found between them. This would be accomplished by associating economic theories and models with religious behavior. The thesis ultimately achieved its objective by demonstrating how economic theories and models could explain trends of growth and decline within the American Protestant tradition. Specifically, the thesis established that the trends of decline in mainline Protestant tradition opposed to the trends of growth in the evangelical Protestant tradition could be best understood by focusing on the unique relationship between a religious organization's degree of tension with society and that organization's congregational attendance. This unique relationship was highlighted and thoroughly investigated by the thesis' proposed theory, the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory.

Throughout the thesis, there were a number of key findings within each chapter. In Chapter 1, it was found that the fundamentals within economic theory, such as supply, demand, market systems, and utility maximization, could be directly applied to religion. It was also established that government involvement plays a large role in shaping the type of religious economy within a society and how that religious economy operates. In Chapter 2, it was found that there do exist theories that utilize supply-side economic theory to analyze religion, this thesis focused on the Sect-Church Process Theory. It was found, however, that the Sect-Church Process Theory leaves a number of questions about

the life cycle of religious organizations unanswered. The Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory is this thesis' proposed theory that strives to fill in the gaps of the established theories. Chapter 3 demonstrated that the mainline Protestant tradition has a number of key characteristics that situate it within the graphs of the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory. The mainline tradition tends to fall on the side of the graphs that have low degree of tension with society. An implication of this situation is that the tradition's percent increase in congregational attendance tends to be negative. Chapter 4 demonstrated that the evangelical Protestant tradition also has a number of key characteristics that situate it within the graphs of the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory. The evangelical tradition, however, tends to fall on the side of the graphs that have a high degree of tension with society. An implication of this situation is that the tradition's percent change in congregational attendance tends to be positive. In Chapter 5, the interviews with the local pastors illustrated that congregations from both Protestant traditions experienced pressure to adapt to dominant culture, but the two traditions tend to adapt different aspects of their congregations. Mainline congregations tend to adapt both their practices and core beliefs while evangelical congregations tend to adapt their practices and keep their core beliefs intact. This key difference maintains the different degrees of tension with society each tradition holds, and therefore helps explain the differing trends of growth and decline between the two traditions.

One prominent limitation of this thesis and the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory is that it is difficult to quantify their findings. The degree of tension a religious organization has with society, which is one of the major variables within the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory, is very difficult to measure in an exact value. This

variable is difficult to measure because there is no unit by which degree of tension with society can be accurately or comprehensively quantified. Basically, the degree of tension a religious organization has with a society is more conceptual than tangible. Due to the abstract nature of this major variable, it is very difficult to plot religious organizations at exact points within the graphs of the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory. Instead, religious organizations are plotted within regions of the graph, according to those religious organization's distinctive characteristics. This is a significant limitation of the theory because it becomes difficult to provide the quantitative evidence required to transform the theory from an abstract notion to a substantive concept. Ultimately, researchers are unable to definitively show whether collected data reflects the trends and implications of the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory.

Despite this limitation, there are multiple avenues for future directions after this thesis. At large, the methodology of applying economic theories and models to religious practice and belief is relatively under-explored. First, the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory could be applied to Christian religious traditions outside of Protestantism. It would be interesting to investigate whether the trends within other Christian traditions, such as Catholicism, would be similar to the trends within Protestantism, and whether those trends would reflect the implications of the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory. Next, the theory could be applied to religious traditions outside of Christianity. Researchers could investigate whether congregations within non-Christian traditions also experience the unique relationship between their degree tension with society and their congregational attendance. Lastly, the Religious Adherence Bell Curve Theory could be applied to religion as a whole. Applying the theory to religion as a whole would provide a

macro-level analysis of religion's overall status in the United States or even religion's overall status in the world. It is also important to consider the possibilities of applying other economic theories and models to religious practice and thought. Further, other aspects of religion, besides size and rate of congregational adherence, could also be explained using economic theory. For example, the economic principle of externalities, which describes positive or negative side effects on people whose interests were not taken into consideration during the initial actions of either a consumer or producer, could be easily applied to religion and interesting findings would come from that application.<sup>87</sup> Ultimately, applying economic theories and models, which are generally considered to be profane or secular, to the realm of the sacred will help bring greater clarity in a field that is often complex and seemingly incomprehensible.

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- Smith, Gregory A., comp. "America's Changing Religious Landscape." *Religious Landscape Study*, May 12<sup>th</sup> 2015.
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<sup>60</sup> "What Is CUIC?" Churches Uniting In Christ. 2013. Accessed November 6, 2015. <http://churchesunitinginchrist.org/about-cuic>.

<sup>61</sup> "Organization: The Churches as Connection." The People of the United Methodist Churh. 2015. Accessed November 6, 2015. <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/organization-church-as-connection>.

<sup>62</sup> Pew Research Center, Nov 3 3015

<sup>63</sup> Hutcheson, 37.

<sup>64</sup> All of the information in this section was taken from the May 12, 2015 Pew Research Center's report on the Religious Landscape Study

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<sup>65</sup> Hart, D. G. "Evangelical Misunderstandings." In *That Old-Time Religion in Modern America: Evangelical Protestantism in the Twentieth Century*. Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2002. 202.

<sup>66</sup> Hart, 201.

<sup>67</sup> Hart, 202.

<sup>68</sup> Balmer and Winner, 71.

<sup>69</sup> Hart, 202.

<sup>70</sup> Hart, 204.

<sup>71</sup> Hart, 204.

<sup>72</sup> Hart, 204.

<sup>73</sup> Hart, 204.

<sup>74</sup> Hart, 205.

<sup>75</sup> Phillips, Curt. Interview by author. October 22, 2015.

<sup>76</sup> All of the information in this section was taken from the May 12, 2015 Pew Research Center's report on the Religious Landscape Study

<sup>77</sup> Pew Research Center, May 12 2015

<sup>78</sup> Pew Research Center, November 3 2015

<sup>79</sup> Pew Research Center, November 3 2015

<sup>80</sup> Pew Research Center, November 3 2015

<sup>81</sup> "About." Solid Rock Church. 2014. Accessed November 6, 2015.  
<http://www.solidrock.us/about>.

<sup>82</sup> "What Is Tapestry All About?" Tapestry Church Claremont. 2015. Accessed November 6, 2015. <http://tapestryclaremont.org/#up>.

<sup>83</sup> "Vision." Living World Assembly: Your Friends in Life's Journey. Accessed November 6, 2015. <http://www.livingwordchino.org/our-vision>.

<sup>84</sup> "Mission Statement." Claremont Presbyterian Church. 2014. Accessed November 6, 2015. <http://www.claremontpres.org/about-us/mission-statement/>.

<sup>85</sup> "Why We're Here." Claremont UMC. 2015. Accessed November 6, 2015.  
<http://www.claremontumc.org/WhatWeBelieve>.

<sup>86</sup> All of the information in this section was derived from the following interviews:

- Morales, Martha. Interview by author. November 6, 2015.
- Phillips, Curt. Interview by author. October 22, 2015.
- Reyes, Ruben. Interview by author. October 21, 2015.
- Ruiz, Victor. Interview by author. October 27, 2015.

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- Sapio, Karen. Interview by author. October 27, 2015.

<sup>87</sup> Tragakes, 519.